



ELEVEN YEARS. . .

IN PARADISE !

JEAN NICOLAS, A.A.



Father Jean Nicolas A.A.
1901 - 1984

FOREWORD

Twice, in 1956 and 1964, Father Henri Moquin and Father Armand Desautels tried to find publishers for an English edition of a book by Father Jean (Judicael) Nicolas entitled *Onze ans au Paradis*. They ran into problems.

There was not, at the time, an English version of the work. Some of the young religious at Assumption Prep started a translation but did not progress very far. Then Fr. Timothy Croghan completed a translation, which was presented to two American publishers through the intermediary of Mr. Harrison Salisbury, Assistant Managing Editor of the *New York Times*.

In reporting the reactions of these publishers, Mr. Salisbury wrote: “Their feeling is that there has been a good deal of material, somewhat similar to that of Father Nicolas’s, published, and that the narrative is not distinguished enough for them to hope for a very large sales potential.

“Both of these judgments are in conflict with my own. As you know, I find Father Nicolas’s story intriguing, straightforward, informative and inspiring. My own feeling is that his experiences really have no parallel and that his story is not like that told by any others who have emerged after years in the Soviet prison system.”

The fact is that Father Nicolas’s book was never commercially published. Because I believe that the story can be of great interest to our young religious who do not know French or who have never heard of this heroic Assumptionist, I now present it. The break-up of the Soviet Union and subsequent events should not blind us to the cruelty and injustice of its totalitarian regime while it was in power.

By and large, I have used Father Croghan’s translation, but I have “Americanized” it somewhat, while making it closer to the French original.

As he indicates in his text, Father Nicolas was born in Morlaix, in Brittany, in 1901. He was ordained as an Assumptionist in 1930 and was assigned as a teacher of French at the Lyceum of Beius, in Rumania, for thirteen years.

Twice, in 1942 and 1943, his Superiors sent him to Odessa, in Ukraine, to repair and take care of the parish church of St. Peter, built by Father Maniglier, A.A., in 1905. In 1943, the Holy See asked him to take charge of this parish, even after the return of the Russians. He was to be aided by Father Leoni, S.J.

In the years after his return from the Soviet prison camps, Father Nicolas served in Assumptionist communities in Valpré, Lyon/Debrousse, Velleuxon, Scy/Chazelles, and Pont-l'Abbé. He used his immense artistic talents (which had, in a way, saved his life) to produce mosaics, enamels, and to restore ancient statues. Working in Chartres, he made the mosaic now found in our General House in Rome. It represents the triple love of an Assumptionist, for Christ, His Mother, and His Church.

The line drawings illustrating this volume were especially made by Father Nicolas for the English edition of this text, and are used here for the first time.

Father Nicolas was called to his Heavenly Reward on February 13, 1984. He was 83 years old.

Richard Richards, A.A.
Provincial Archivist

CHAPTER ONE

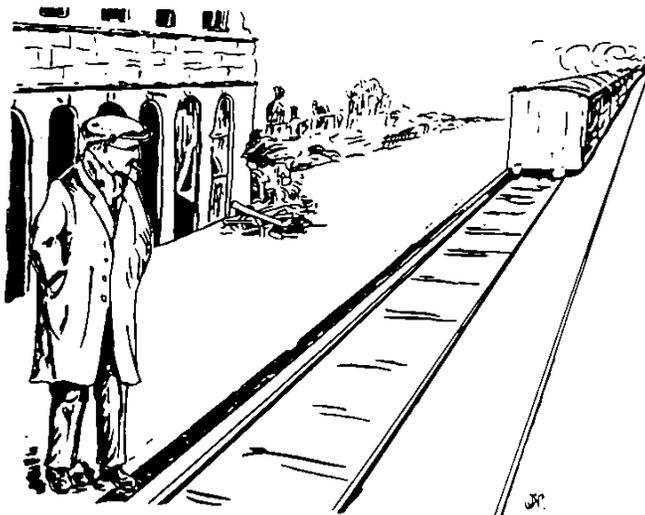
ON THE THRESHOLD OF PARADISE

Tuesday, April 4, 1944

That afternoon, in Odessa, I was gazing at a train. The train was something special, because it was the last one leaving for the West.

Crowded refugees were swirling along the platform, amid piles of suitcases, knapsacks, crates, beds, blankets, dishware, and clothing. They were feverishly cramming themselves and their belongings into the freight cars.

It was 4 p.m. and a heavy, dank fog almost shrouded the anxious, almost panicky, crowd. I had accompanied to the station a French family that had at the last moment obtained a visa for Rumania.



A whistle blew. Slowly the train shuddered into motion, and into a future at best uncertain, for all those aboard. With it went my last chance to rejoin my past. I remained almost alone on the station platform.

I wore a Soviet-style flat cap, a black top-coat. Hands in my pockets, a Russian cigarette dangling from my mouth, I listened to the clatter of the box-cars as they passed, drew further away, and gradually disappeared in the dusk.

Suddenly I felt depressed. Had I wanted, I too could have left. But my reasons for staying were compelling. Yet I was filled with foreboding, preoccupied and upset despite myself.

Almost mechanically, I left the station, which had been in ruins for two years. I had quite a walk to go to my lodgings, down near the docks, clear across the city.

Odessa, on that particular evening, had all the features with which I had become familiar during many weeks. German and Rumanian troops were in full retreat. Day and night, long convoys of artillery had been rumbling through the city from east to west. Various animal insignia revealed the units to which they belonged. Often I had watched them, dreaming that I was in France and that it was from my country that they were being driven.

Meanwhile, here in Odessa, bombings had increased. The fleeing Axis troops were systematically destroying docks and factories. The Russians were advancing. They were already at Nicolaev, and soon they would cross the Bug River. Contradictory reports compounded the confusion. Nerves were taut; the atmosphere was tense.

Beneath the city, ancient limestone quarries had become catacombs, like those of Rome. They sheltered thousands of partisans, some of whom had lived there during the whole two years of the Occupation. A people of darkness ... coming and going by secret passages. Everyone fears them because not all of them are dedicated patriots; some are just plain bandits masquerading as partisans.

The occupying forces no longer make any serious attempt to police the city, and this past week has been one of complete anarchy.

I make my way down the long avenue which the departing ‘conquerors’ had renamed *Ghitlerovskaia oulitsa* in honor of the Fuehrer. Everyone I meet is in a hurry. Some are stooped under the weight of sacks crammed with all kinds of things. Others drag little handcarts piled with doors and shutters wrenched from bomb-damaged buildings. Children are harnessed to little sleds laden with buckets of coal. No one speaks, but hurries on. Night is falling. It is time to be home behind locked doors. Tomorrow will be like today.

On the sidewalk, three men scurry toward the main door of a large house. Two of them push the third into the courtyard, and before the door closes again I hear two pistol shots, a score has been settled. I hurry on. In a side street, about 200 yards from where I live, three or four teenagers force the shutters of a former beer-shop, hoping to find liquor. Everyone sees them but no one dares to say anything. Night falls.

In another unlighted street, 50 yards away, there are shouts, someone is being attacked. I just hear “Pass me the razor.” How heavily the gloom of the night lays upon my heart.

Finally I reach home. The iron gate is closed and padlocked immediately. Behind blacked-out windows, I light a candle. I turn to the friend who shared my lodgings. “That’s it. They have gone. There will be no more trains to Rumania.”

The next day is dreary. As time passes, the return of the Russians to Odessa becomes more imminent. Feverish activity is intensified. Everyone tries to obtain a supply of food and fuel. German soldiers are selling chocolates, jams, and cigars cheap. Speculation runs riot.

I myself had two main worries. Three days before the last train had left Odessa, a Red Cross representative had passed to me a fairly large sum in Rumanian currency. This was supposed to help the members of the small French colony, made up especially of poor old women. Also, a

French engineer had given me some furniture and kitchen utensils. I had to find some way to get them to my apartment. I needed them.

To change the money I had to resort to the black market. After discreet inquiries here and there, I managed to get in touch with the “agents.” These turned out to be groups of children and teenagers. They were suspicious because I was obviously a foreigner and could not speak their language well. “You can’t fool us,” they said, “you’re from the police.” I had to do a lot of explaining before they even began to trust me. It wasn’t prudent to deal with large sums of money; so I had to start over the whole maneuver a number of times. I spent Wednesday and Thursday this way, but was unable to change everything into rubles. In a few days, when the last soldiers and officials had left the country, Rumanian money and German marks would have absolutely no value.

And my little old ladies were in dire need. They had nothing. I had to take a chance. Accompanied by a French lady, I went to a deserted corner of the market and met one of the questionable partisans, a colossus of unappealing mien. But he had the rubles we needed. To prove it he pulled out of his pocket a big bundle of brand-new bills. As I took the last of the Rumanian currency from my wallet, I was afraid that he would



snatch it from me, and that my share would be a punch or a knife cut. He contented himself with deducting an exorbitant commission. In our situation there was nothing that we could do about it.

It was easier to arrange for the moving of my furniture. I soon found a trucker who agreed to take care of the matter, for twice the normal fee. My troubles began with the concierge.

Although my engineer had left me all the documents needed to show that he had given me the furniture, the concierge insisted that it had been confiscated from some Jewish people and that it was his duty to return it to the rightful owners when they returned. After an argument, a compromise, and a tip, he allowed me to take less than half of my property. I suppose that he sold the rest in the city's bazaar.

It was now Friday evening, Good Friday. My French ladies would have a bit of money for Easter. In the restlessness of the times, amid increasing bombardments, the Feast would keep alive in our hearts the hope that better days would return. But it would also accentuate our distress and our insignificance in the drama we were living. We feared more tragic events in the near future.

On Saturday morning I had a very narrow escape. As I was walking down the street, a Polish woman whom I did not know sidled up to me and whispered "Watch out...a raid." Sure enough, a hundred yards away people were running and soldiers were advancing. I had just time to slip into a yard, and through the corridors of a large house was able to escape to another street. I was lucky to escape, because for a month and a half my permit to come from Rumania to Odessa had expired. I had avoided asking for an extension because I was afraid it would be refused. I had tried to live as unobtrusively as possible.

I hurried home as fast as I could, and found Vassia (about whom I shall say more later) down in the cellar, trying with boards and bricks to build a kind of hideout for some of her Russian friends who were trying to hide from the occupying troops.

It may now be time, before the Red army occupies Odessa, to tell you who I am, where I come from, how and why I am here.

ELEVEN YEARS... IN PARADISE!

CHAPTER TWO

FIRST CONTACTS

During my imprisonment in the Soviet Union, I had to write out my life story at least seventeen or eighteen times. I think that I can manage to do it just once more.

But as I suppose that my readers are not infected with the disease known in some countries as “spy-itis,” I hope I shall be pardoned if I omit some details which for the political police were of primary importance.

It is unnecessary to know the name, age, social status of my parents, the number of my brothers and sisters, whom they married, their occupations, and the names and number of their children. I think too that I need not describe the motives, avowed or “secret,” of my slightest movements between my 16th and my 42nd year, the names and addresses of my correspondents, the contents of my letters, etc., etc.

I was born in 1901 at Morlaix, a picturesque little Breton village near the English Channel. From three or four generations of my family I inherited artistic tastes and tendencies, to which, in the troubles of the camps, I owe my very life.

My studies, begun in Morlaix, were continued on the banks of the Loire, one of the most beautiful regions of France.

My natural inclination was to become an architect, but for other and nobler motives I turned toward the priesthood and religious life. I was especially interested in the Christian Near East; so I joined the Assumptionists who had established themselves there. This decision brought me to Belgium where I received my religious training and began

my graduate studies. These were interrupted by my military service, in the course of which I was sent to Constantinople, still occupied by Allied troops since World War I. There I was assigned to special duty in the service of the Missions. After my demobilization, I was sent for two years to a college at Varna, in Bulgaria. I remember my Superior there jokingly saying “Make the most of your stay in Bulgaria. Learn the language; it is the easiest of the Slav languages. If you ever get to Russia, it will be very useful.” He wasn’t trying to be a prophet, but...

When my studies were completed, I asked to be sent to Rumania. So I was sent as Professor of French to a high school in Beius, in Transylvania. It was a pretty town, with its white buildings stretching into a rich valley encircled by the Carpathian mountains. There in summertime we made many hiking trips with our students. In winter there were exuberant skiing trips on the snowy slopes. But the most interesting aspect of Beius was its lively student population, happy, even boisterous, full of youth and hope. In this charming and busy milieu, I spent thirteen years.

WAR

1939 brought anguish as everyone knows. In Rumania, the German army rapidly overran the country. The “Agreement of Vienna” brought the frontiers of Hungary very close to us. During the summer vacations of 1942, our boarding school with 200 students was flooded with Rumanian refugees fleeing from the ceded territory. By October, more than half of our students had crossed the frontier secretly. They were practically destitute when they arrived.

Those were difficult years. Restrictions and rising prices were a heavy burden. State aid to refugees was negligible. Still, one morning, we were awakened by martial music and cheering. Odessa had finally fallen to Rumanian troops after months of siege and terrible sacrifice.

Who could have told me then how this news would change the course of my life?

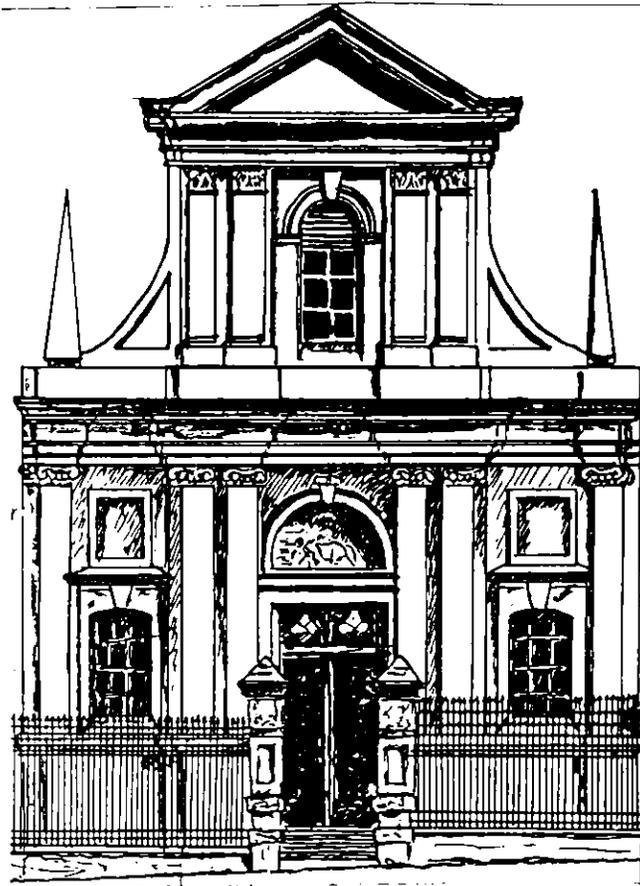
A PAGE OF ARCHIVES

As early as 1870, Father Emmanuel d'Alzon, founder of the Assumptionists, had come to regard Odessa as the gateway to the immense Russian empire, which was as impenetrable then as it is today. He wrote:

“I am studying Russia closely. Something irresistible is urging me to follow the movements of this colossus, which God seems to be shaking, in order to lead it in a direction which it does not want to take. No truly Christian observer can take his eyes off this region, where there is being revealed a phenomenon which is still shapeless but which is clearly of amazing proportions. From this tremendous ferment will come something terribly evil or immensely good.”

On May 2, 1878, he noted: “The Russian colossus is about to enter into convulsions. On this revolution-swept soil we shall plant the True Cross.” And on April 20, 1876, he wrote: “I am convinced that sooner or later Russia will open its gates to us, even if we have to lubricate its locks and hinges with our own blood.”

In fact, the Assumptionists had been in Russia since 1905, in the person of Father Auguste Maniglier. In Odessa, he established himself amid the flourishing French colony. By 1910 he had built the beautiful little church of St. Peter and a fine rectory. Within the city he opened a large hostel, and in a suburban park had a Senior Citizens Home. In 1921, after the defeat of the White Russians, Fr. Maniglier had to abandon his work.



ST. PETER'S CHURCH, ODESSA

Then amid the very height of Bolshevist fever, the enthusiastic Father Pius Neveu became the Apostolic Administrator of Moscow and Pope Pius XI gave him extensive faculties for the whole country. When illness obliged him to leave the Soviet Union, American Assumptionists carried on his work.

A NEW HORIZON

In Odessa meanwhile, military bands played victory music and newspapers glorified the men who had captured Odessa. After several weeks, soldiers on leave marveled at the large and rich city, even after a

long siege. They spoke of the strong fortresses, which bounced back artillery shells, from steel or concrete walls covered with rubber.

The 1942-43 academic year opened amid increased difficulties, which we now took in stride. While I was worrying about finding enough food for our many students, I received a letter from Bucharest urging me to obtain a pass to go to Odessa. This was relatively easy to do because all the territory between the Dniester and Bug rivers was now exclusively under Rumanian administration. It was suggested that I take advantage of any means to get to Odessa in order to see what had happened to our church there and to bring help to any French people whom I might find in the city. I devoted the New Year vacation to getting my permit.

It was still dark when the train crossed the Dniester and headed toward the Ukrainian steppes and Odessa, where I arrived at daybreak. I must confess to a thrill as I left the station and saw the bulbous domes of a Russian church for the first time. I had been told to go down the avenue in front of the church for about a half-mile. There I would find a Catholic church which had been re-established by missionaries from Rumania, Germany, and Poland. At first I was received rather coldly, and I later found out why. A few days previously, they had been swindled by a character wearing a religious garb.

My first impressions of Odessa were somewhat painful. The people seemed poorly dressed, and their boots and shoes were crudely made of rough felt. Along the pockmarked sidewalks were the ruins of blockhouses, silent witnesses to recent fighting. There were no taxis or other means of transportation. Only a band of children offered to carry my baggage. But I had been forewarned...the Russians were experts in the matter of theft. I preferred to carry my bags myself, rather than see them disappear simultaneously, one to the left, the other to the right, with me unable to chase after them.

THE FRENCH COLONY

I had the address of the Lady President of the small group of French nationals. She lived in the center of the city in a vast house that at one time had been the most opulent in town. After 25 years of “communal” regime, the dwelling had lost all of its former splendor. All that remained of its past glories was the giant marble staircase, which led me up four flights to the apartment, shared by four families, where this lady had the luxury of a single room. Our meeting was an emotional one, and soon she told me the sad story.

Since Fr. Maniglier’s departure in 1921, the French colony had dwindled. The tiny handful that stayed made gallant efforts to keep the church. The financial situation worsened, the attitude of the authorities became harsher, taxes were increased. But these brave people kept their priestless church for 16 years, until 1937, when sheer destitution forced them to let it pass into the hands of the Bolsheviks.

MY FIRST VISIT TO ST. PETER’S

The new masters lost no time in changing things. The marble altar was destroyed; the oak pews were sent to a lecture hall of the University; the fine Venetian mosaic of St. Peter which had adorned the main door was relegated to the anti-religious museum. The organ was torn out; the sacristy was converted to an office, its walls covered with cheap paper. In the choir loft, the janitor had set up cages for his geese. The nave of the church was filled with file cabinets crammed with documents. The church had held the secret archives of the Communist party of Odessa.

At the outset of the Siege, the first Rumanian bomb had fallen about fifty yards away from the church, completely destroying the nearby Children’s Hospital. When I saw the scene, it was scarcely inspiring. All

the neighboring houses had been damaged. Some 200 yards away the Conservatory of Music was little more than a shell. The roof of St. Peter's was badly damaged and all the windows had been blown out. At first we could not get inside because the iron grille was chained and padlocked. I knocked, I shouted, I rattled the chains in vain. After about ten minutes, a woman raised her frightened face above a wall at the far end of the yard. Seeing an old lady and a priest, instead of the police, who were always feared, be they Russian or Rumanian, she decided to come and see what we wanted. We explained our mission and she finally let us in.

We visited the church first. The cabinets, doors wide open, stood in the midst of an accumulation of garbage and filth. Of course the Communist documents were gone; all that remained was a rubber stamp which I found in the dust.



The rectory, just behind, had fared worse. There was almost no roof. One whole side of the house was badly damaged, and of course there remained not a single window. A single room remained more or less

inhabitable, occupied by a Russian and his wife who, it seems, had moved in when Fr. Maniglier had left. To prevent looters from stealing doors, windows, and parquet flooring, the occupants had sealed everything off.

Thus I returned to the lodging where, before the Revolution, my confrere had worked and spent himself. He had gradually acquired an extraordinary library of civil and religious history of Russia. After his departure, the books were sold by weight as waste paper.

It was getting late and I still had to find lodging. The father of one of my students, mobilized here, found me a room in a private house. There, that evening, while enjoying some of the delicacies from Rumania, I had my first lesson in Russian. I would point out an object or draw a picture of it and was told how to say it in Russian. In the musical accents of my hosts I could find little in common with the unpolished Rumanian which I had studied twenty years before. A book which I casually picked up from the table brought me a little consolation; there were many words which I recognized, despite three or four letters that were peculiar to Russian. My sojourn in Varna had not been useless after all.

IN TOWN

The next day I visited my compatriots who were supposed to meet on New Year's day in the house of the Lady President, over a cup of tea.

Having gathered the documents needed for my report, I set about visiting the city. What was striking at first was the orderly lay-out of the city, the architectural richness of many of the buildings, the numerous gardens and squares, and the harbor on the Black Sea. I walked up the magnificent flight of granite steps leading to the statue of the Duke of Richelieu. In 1795, mandated by Catherine II, he had become the real founder of the city. The wounds and scars of the long siege were evident,

but Odessa in 1942 was still beautiful and I could understand the admiration aroused among the Rumanian soldiers.

According to older inhabitants of Odessa, the city had lost its most precious jewel some twenty years before when the beautiful cathedral was dynamited by the Bolsheviks. A terrible storm which arose almost simultaneously and closed the harbor to shipping was taken by the people as a sign of God's anger.

The factories, the gigantic mills, the naval dockyard, the port through which poured the wealth of the Ukraine, the suburban villas, and the health resorts extending all along the beaches had made Odessa a rich and attractive city. The population had had a large percentage of Jews, many of whom had fled to the Tashkent area in Central Asia before the city's occupation by Axis troops.

In spite of the destruction wrought by the revolutionaries, a few churches and one monastery still stood. Several shrines had been closed or converted to various profane uses. But even in the darkest days of anti-religious strife, the church in the cemetery had stayed open. Here is its story:

STALIN AND THE OCULIST

One of the most eminent professors of the University of Odessa, Professor Filatov, had been called in to treat Stalin. The treatment had been so successful that Stalin wanted to do something to reward Filatov. The Professor made a single request: that at least one of the churches of Odessa might remain open. Later, I often saw the Professor kneeling reverently at various services in our Catholic church. Yet I read in a Soviet magazine that he was a convinced Materialist-Progressive. I beg leave to doubt this.

THE LIFE OF THE PEOPLE

The appearance of the people had little in common with that of the city. I got the impression of extreme poverty. At home, people had always been neat and well dressed, so perhaps I was too harsh in my appraisal of the “proletarian simplicity” of my new environment. But rags are always rags, and never have I seen so many outstretched hands as in Odessa.

The Occupying Forces had lifted some of the restrictions on business without abolishing completely the old set-up. Collective work for the administration still remained, as did the one-sided press and the special stores and restaurants reserved for privileged clientele. This last did not concern me as I had been invited to dine in the Officers’ Mess for the duration of my visit.

As a result of the new freedom, innumerable stores had opened and the bazaar or open market was one of the most picturesque spots in town. There, amid an indescribable uproar, you could find almost anything. Thieves and robbers were very busy. It was not wise to try and discover the origin of the goods displayed for sale. One would have discovered mysterious or macabre things, such as a child’s fingernails found in a sausage. Nevertheless, once I had settled down in Odessa, I went to the bazaar almost daily.

A SECOND TRIP TO ODESSA

The New Year vacation ended and I returned to Beius. As a souvenir I brought back a beautiful icon of the Christ which I placed in my office, facing the door. Following the Russian custom I placed a vigil light before it. Time passed quickly and it was summer. Our students left and again I received a message from Bucharest. It urged me to make the most of the continued possibility of getting into Transnistria and return to

Odessa. I was to try and repair the church, while also helping the clergy of the Polish church. I was accompanied by a lay brother who was a good carpenter. The Russian couple in the rectory, Vasia and his wife Ksenia, opened wide the doors this time. Our first task was to find some window panes and a few planks to make a bed for ourselves.

BISHOP GLAZER

Monsignor Glazer, pastor of the Polish church, had had the roof of St. Peter's repaired while I had been away, in order to avoid additional deterioration of the church. This eminent prelate, of German origin, born in the vicinity of Odessa, was a man of great charm and broad culture. He spoke eight languages fluently and had endeared himself to everyone. He was a constant source of wisdom, strength, and encouragement to me while we were together in Odessa. He was ordained a bishop in the latter part of 1943. The Russian recapture of the city forced him to leave. He was named to the see of Iassy, some eight miles from the frontier imposed by the victors. In this unfortunate Rumania, in the process of becoming a "People's Democracy" and a satellite of Russia, he suffered greatly. His trials were especially severe in 1949-1950 when the campaign to nationalize the Catholic church began. Obviously it would be a great victory for the Communists' if they could induce a religious leader of his standing to fall in with their plan. The mental torture he endured must have been tremendous, because just three days before his death in May, 1950 he entrusted this message to a priest: "Tell His Excellency the Nuncio that I remain faithful, but I don't think that I can hold out for more than three days. I will die or go mad." Three days later he died of cerebral hemorrhage.

RESTORATION AND REPAIRS

After fixing up our own room, we directed all our efforts to fixing up the church. We stripped off the wallpaper, washed the walls, carted outside a large pile of plasterwork, and dragged the steel cabinets into the yard. We would try to sell them as scrap. The window frames were still gaping, but it was summer and that could wait. A plain table, covered with a cloth, became our temporary altar. The following Sunday we were able to open the second Catholic church in Odessa, with a group of Rumanian soldiers as our choir. Our French compatriots were in seventh heaven.

The whole summer of 1943 was spent in making repairs and improvements to the church and refectory. The steel cabinets were sold for enough to buy glass for the windows. With the cooperation of the Rumanian authorities the shattered wall was completely reconstructed. There remained one project close to my heart: the tympanum mosaic of St. Peter, which had been replaced by a big window. The anti-religious museum (formerly an Armenian church) had been bombed and burnt. But we found the mosaic leaning against B-wall, badly damaged. The neighborhood children had been busy with their pocket knives, digging out many of the beautiful colored and gilt stones. I could not put it back in place in its damaged condition. Where in Odessa could I find mosaic pieces?

There was always the bazaar, universal source of supplies. For days I searched the place up and down and finally found what I needed. Not indeed the fine enamels of Venice, but a consignment of cups, plates, dishes and vases the color and design of which had tints similar to the mosaic. With hammer, pliers and burin we quickly transformed this tableware into pretty little squares which we cemented into place. Some gold leaf, glued under glass, lent a touch of dignity. After two weeks' work we were able to put the mosaic back in place, on August 15.

That summer saw a great deal of work but no adventures. It was saddened for me by the news of the death of my father in early August.

Toward the end of August, we left Odessa to return to Bucharest and Beius, and a new school year. Naturally, everyone wanted to hear about my travels. In the evenings we would gather around a samovar which I had brought back with me, and I would discuss my trip. But I always spoke of it as something past, a pleasant interlude which, in the light of recent events, was finished forever.

Sometimes our outlook is too narrow when we set about to judge. The very reasons which seemed to preclude a return to the Soviet Union led to my making a third, more tragic, trip there.

ELEVEN YEARS... IN PARADISE!

CHAPTER THREE

ASSIGNED TO ODESSA

THUNDER CLAP

One morning, I received a registered letter from Bucharest. As I read it a tingling sensation ran up my spine. Besides that, nothing... except the pounding of my heart.

I looked again at the two sheets of paper. On the first I recognized the familiar handwriting of my Superior who was sending me the other message, with its letterhead indicating that it was from a much higher authority. “Would Father Nicholas accept to return to Odessa to assume spiritual charge of the faithful there? Would he remain there even after the anticipated return of the Russians, in spite of possible consequences to himself?”

The letter was brief but shattering. What an upheaval! What a new direction to my whole life!

I found my way to the chapel to beg for strength and light.

I waited two weeks before answering. Only after I had sent my acceptance did I experience equilibrium and calm. I was reminded of a saying by Fr. d’Alzon: “A mere wish of the Holy See is for us a command.” it was now time to put this idea into practice. The honor of having been chosen to man this outpost was not to be weighed against personal considerations or the selfishness of fear.



In my response to Bucharest I raised a single objection: “How, given my limited knowledge of Russian, could I carry out my mission with any degree of success?” Swiftly came the reply: “You will not be alone. Your companion speaks Russian fluently.”

I now had only to resolve one problem, finding a French Professor to replace me in the High School and a new director for the Boarding School. This was in October, and in six weeks everything was settled. On December 16, 1943, when the students left for their Christmas vacations, I said goodbye to them. It wasn't easy. Memories of thirteen happy years flooded my mind as the shadows of a menacing and dangerous future closed in on me.

Yet I can remember even now the words of Victor Popovicius, one of my colleagues and Geography teacher in the High School: “You are leaving and we hate to see you go. Who will be more unhappy, you who leave for Russia or we who remain here?”

Alas! Those I left behind soon saw their country become a People's Democracy. They were driven from their post and into misery. They experienced the desolation of being deprived of the right to serve God according to their conscience. Almost all of those with whom I worked are now dead, having suffered, probably, more than I did.

In 1946, a decree suppressed the legal existence of the Catholic Church of Eastern Rite. The spoils were divided between the State and the National church whose greed was matched only by its servility toward the new masters. My friend Victor Popovicius, whom I mentioned above, was then Headmaster of the High School in Beius. When the new Communistic director came to take things over, Victor, in the very act of turning over keys and archives, suffered a heart attack and died.

With him, a glorious past disappeared. For twenty-five years, the High School in Beius, like its older counterpart in Blaj, had given a remarkable intellectual elite to Church and Nation. Their role was too powerful, their influence too great, for them not to be the prime targets of the atheistic materialism brought in by the armies of the "Liberators."

MY COMPANION

I spent several days in Bucharest, making final preparations for my departure and obtaining the necessary visas. I had hoped to reach Odessa on Christmas Eve, but a misunderstanding at the frontier delayed me for a day. As the train crossed the Dniester River, I was a prey to deep emotions. What lay beyond the horizon? I felt as I had in August 1939, on the Alma Bridge in Paris: what would happen before I saw Paris again?

Fr. Pietro Leoni had arrived in Odessa several days before me. When I first saw him, I immediately took to him. He was about 35, of medium build, with a beard that was almost red. He had a brilliant smile.

His eyes, behind thick lenses, were serious, calm, decisive, and full of simplicity. We were together for the first time, we who would endure the same difficulties, walk the same paths, and sometimes meet each other in the camps after we had lost our freedom. We had confidence in each other.

Right after the holidays, we got down to work. Between us we had brought all the equipment for our sacristy. We placed an order for a marble altar similar to the old one. We filled in the cracks in the walls and repainted them. We were lucky enough to get back some of our old pews. Little by little St. Peter's church became worthy of its name.

Repairing the rectory went along well. Each one had his own room. We installed a kitchen and a bathroom, to the manifest pleasure of Vassia/Ksenia.

NEW YEAR WISHES

Cold and snow ushered in 1944. I went walking down the main street, when a group of girls barred my passage, just outside the Opera House. "*S'novym godom*" (literally: With the New Year. Understood: We wish you the very best). And they pelted me with handfuls of wheat seeds. It was a symbol of the happiness that they were wishing me. Ignoring the custom and the formula, I protested somewhat clumsily. "What is he saying?" asked one of the girls. "He's just grumbling," another replied. And the group ran away laughing. That evening the French ladies explained the custom to me.

LIGHT AND SHADE

Reports from the front indicated that the situation in Odessa would soon change radically. German motorized columns, in ever increasing numbers, were arriving from the east and crossing the city to new

positions. Other troops were heading for the Crimea. Bishop Glazer's house was always open to any conscripted German priests who had an hour or two to spare. The fact that I sometimes dined with these priests in the Bishop's house was the basis for later accusations that I was in touch with the Gestapo and was, in reality, a German spy.

However alarming the situation might be, the Opera House continued to function. Operas were presented up until the very last days of the Occupation. Surpassed only by the Scala in Milan and the Vienna Opera House, the Odessa Opera House escaped destruction. It had been mined, but the concierge, aided by some of the performers, succeeded in disarming the explosives.

The landmark, designed by a French architect, was spared. The Polish church had a fine mixed choir. To encourage them, the Church officials had given them season tickets to a box at the Opera. Sometimes I accompanied them and was able to admire the fine Russian ballets in a stage setting that was one the best in the world. The memory of these fine spectacles still remains with me despite the many nightmares I had in Russia.

The Russian churches, with the splendor of their ceremonies and the crowds of worshippers, were another source of deep spiritual emotion. As the priests, clothed in golden vestments, passed to and fro before the holy icons, the mists of sweet-smelling incense and the contrasts of shadows and light made the scene genuine Rembrandt. The calm bass voice of the deacon intoning the antiphons gave a note of serenity to the pageant. But the polyphonic responses of the choir were the bursting free of all the inmost sentiments of people in prayer. Growing and swelling, the music caught up the souls of the world, blending and pouring forth all their yearnings in one imperious cry of supplication.

This was the Russia of which I had read so often, the eternal Russia of simple faith and profound mysticism. Twenty-five years of Marxism

had mutilated its soul but have not destroyed it. And when History, as it surely will, notes the end of another tyranny, Russia, bruised but purified, will find its way back to the Light and the Truth; and the Church will continue its centuries-old mission of salvation and peace.

Emerging into the street after such a spiritual experience, one finds a brutal contrast. Down at the corner of the street, a crowd has gathered and women are weeping. A convoy of captured Russians is passing, escorted by other Russians, former prisoners but now bearing German arms. People throw bread and other food to the prisoners over the heads of the protesting guards. Later in the evening, the captives will be loaded onto special ships and taken to unknown destinations. A few miles off the coast, trap doors will be opened beneath the prisoners and the sea will receive yet another secret. Such deportations are commonplace.

All kinds of horrible stories sped from mouth to mouth. One has it that a freight car full of starving children had just arrived at the station, from the Ukraine. Some were dying; others, mercifully, were dead, their ears gnawed off, and not by rats.

Every day such incidents happened, vouched for by eyewitnesses. We were told of a pogrom which had happened two years before. One of our French people, 100% Aryan, would have died had she not been able to produce her passport. Two thousand Jews, men, women, and children, had been herded into the vast shed of a collective farm in Lusdorf, near Odessa. The building was saturated with gasoline and set ablaze. Distraught women threw their children out the windows, only to see them slain by machine-gunners posted all around the building. While the ashes were still warm, scavengers turned over the debris and burnt bones, searching for jewelry and gold or silver tooth fillings.

THE TRIALS OF A FRENCH FAMILY

Even among my new friends, I found no escape from the prevailing mood of gloom and anxiety. Their conversations were full of painful memories.

One of these friends, born in Odessa but of Alsatian stock, lived with his wife and eleven-year-old son, Vitia, in one room near the station. Victor J. was a mechanical engineer who had been ordered by the Rumanian authorities to repair the machines of the Odessa tobacco factory, which had been demolished by the Russians before their retreats. His family went through a terrible ordeal. When the moment arrived for Victor to fulfill his military service, he was supposed by law to be free to choose his nationality. He chose France. On his return to Odessa, he was arrested and spent two years in prison. There he was tortured, physically and morally, to elicit a confession that he was a spy.

His wife was also arrested and their two-year old son was taken away from them. The interrogation tactics were standard: Victor was told that his wife had confessed and that he should tell all that he knew; she was told that he had confessed and that she should do the same.

While Victor lay bruised and battered on the floor of a cell, his wife was being detained in a large room where a police officer (R.G.B.) paced back and forth incessantly. Each time he passed, he hit her in the face with the butt of his revolver and managed to break all her teeth. These tortures ended only when the bloodthirsty chief of police, Iegov, was removed from office.

Victor also told me that his cellmates were often police officers who had lost their position. Their crime against the State (they had REAL ones on their conscience too) was that they had failed to meet their work quota. They had a fixed number of arrests of spies, saboteurs, dissidents, “enemies of the people” that they had to make each week. Failure to do so resulted in their own arrest for their lack of zeal in the service of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Many years later I met Victor and his family in France. They were living along the Saone River, happy and trying to forget their days of misfortune. “There is just one thing that upsets me,” said Victor, “When we try to tell people the kind of life we lived among the Bolsheviks, they won’t believe us. They say we are exaggerating. That such a thing is impossible!”

THE LAST DAYS

At the beginning of February, I decided to go to Bucharest for a few days to settle some business matters. From there, I phoned the school in Beius and asked that someone bring me a suitcase. The news of this unexpected call spread quickly and soon it was reported that I was back for good. I don’t know how they found out that I was around, but some students who were in town at a movie left the show in the middle and came to welcome me. It was my last contact with them, and I need hardly say that the incident touched me deeply.

When I returned to Odessa around February 11, the Occupying Forces had already begun the systematic demolition of their installations. The suburbs, where most of the factories were, suffered extensive damage; but even in the center of the city many houses were destroyed. When the Russians had left the city, they had left the port intact. Now its buildings were a shambles and the harbor was a minefield. Administrative buildings, situated for the most part in schools and other large buildings, were dynamited or set afire on the very eve of the Russian return.

We spent most of our time in the library or seeking food supplies. Some Rumanian gave us some coupons that enabled us to obtain sugar and staples. We preciously hoarded our little supply of white flour used to make hosts.

For centuries there had been a large German colony in Odessa, and many of our Catholic people were of German stock. Their situation now was precarious, to say the least. They now had to leave their homes, or face deportation or death. Many of them gathered in our church for a farewell ceremony. Poor people! Many of them died on their journey, some even before crossing the Dniester, where they were delayed by broken bridges and masses of refugees like themselves.

Only Polish and Baltic Catholics remained in Odessa, at least 8,000. These faithful deserved that we run some risk for them.

Before Bishop Glazer himself had to leave, we received a final telegram from Rome giving us permission to leave, if we thought it necessary. Father Leoni and I both responded that we freely accepted that we might be imprisoned. We then received special faculties that might be required in our future situation. With tears in his eyes, Bishop Glazer gave us his blessing and commended us to the care of Divine Providence.

We were alone now and we had no illusions as to what the future might hold. Yet, in the knowledge that we were doing a real work of love for our people, our hearts were light and our souls at peace.

I have already described the feverish atmosphere of those last few weeks under ever increasing bombardments. Amid this tension arrived Easter Sunday, April 9, 1944.

The fervor of our parishioners was great. During the singing of the Alleluia, a violent bombardment began. People started to weep but no one moved. At the end of the Mass, Fr. Leoni lingered a moment with the faithful. Amid our altar boys, I could see flames still rising from a school which the soldiers had set ablaze the night before.

“Come children,” I said to the lads, “now that the bombing has ended, let’s go home.”

“Father, let’s stay with Fr. Leoni and go back together.”

“Fine.”

Less than ten minutes later, a terrific blast shook the city. Smoke and dust arose from everywhere, and there was the sound of breaking glass. Our road back home was almost unrecognizable. Sidewalks had been blown up; horses lay disemboweled; trucks had been smashed; the dead, especially women, lay all around. It was Easter...in the vestibule of Hell. The Germans had just blown up all the canals, which they had mined days earlier. If it had not been for Kolia, the altar boy, I would have been blown up with many others.

I was lucky again in the afternoon: a shell landed on the pile of rubble between the church and the rectory, but it was a dud. Our neighbors, who had taken refuge in cellars, trembled and wept. Ksenia wondered how I could afford to smile.

In the evening, fighting broke out in the suburbs, and when we awoke the next morning we discovered that we had been “liberated.” The Red Army had entered Odessa at dawn.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE SPIDER WEB

BELIEVERS AND POLICEMEN

Shooting was continuing in the western part of the city and prudence dictated that we stay indoors. But we were anxious about our faithful and impatient to obtain news about them.

About 9 o'clock I was in St. Peter's; the door slowly opened, a head appeared and looked cautiously around. Very timidly a Red Army soldier entered, twisting his cap nervously in his hand. He was the first one I had ever seen. He seemed about 40 years old.

He blurted out "This is a church? Here are four rubles. Light a candle in thanksgiving for our victory." And he left.

About 11, a French woman arrived, anxious to see how we were faring. I assured her that we were fine, and then we went out to see how our other compatriots were. Evidence of fighting was everywhere. At a street corner, a Rumanian soldier emerged, hands high in surrender. A crowd gathered around. "Don't be afraid," they said, "We won't kill you. We need you to work for us now."

Further down, soldiers were conducting a house-to-house search. Some of them were Czechs, once conscripted into the German army but now on the side of the Russians. Here and there were German tanks and trucks, still smoking.

Groups of shock troops who had captured the city, many of them women, lay resting in a park. Some called out to a passing officer, "Comrade Lieutenant, look at us. Anyone would think that we were completely undisciplined." And everybody burst out laughing.

On the sidewalk in front of us, a soldier picked up a child and embraced it lovingly. Perhaps the man had a son of his own, or considered the child as a symbol of what he was fighting for. It was one of the contrasts that struck us.

In the Lady President's house, we discussed what we had to do and how we would proceed. As I returned home, I noticed typed or handwritten notices, new decrees ordering the mobilization of all Soviet citizens, or the confiscation of all radios, bicycles, typewriters, foreign currency, and all the equipment left by the Germans.

Fr. Leoni and I decided to announce our presence to the Soviet authorities. A French friend, of Russian ancestry, volunteered to find the headquarters of the N.K.V.D. (police). How little we knew of the N.K.V.D.! They congratulated our friend on her patriotism in denouncing possible spies.

We did not have to wait long before armed soldiers arrived at our house and ordered us to go with them to the police. One of them was kind enough to advise us to take along some food. There was no way of knowing how long we would have to stay.

With our little bundles we trudged along beside the soldiers with their sub-machine guns at the ready. People stopped to watch, and an old lady pointed us out to her grandson, a lad seven or eight years old: "See the spies."



We gave our names and nationalities to the police chief, a civilian. And we told him that we were priests and that we

were concerned only with the spiritual welfare of the Catholics in Odessa. "All right," he said, "go back home now, *poka* (for now). The operative word of course was *poka*, as we were to discover some months later.

Actually, for a whole year we were able to move freely about the city, carrying out our pastoral duties. There were some annoying incidents but we wrote them off as insignificant, although they increased as months passed. The sedulous care with which we avoided any conversation or action savoring of the political was just so much wasted effort. We felt that our single-minded devotion to the needs of our people would speak for itself and that we would be allowed to do the work entrusted to us.

But "THEY" were very interested in us. They wove a veritable spider web of spies and informers, some well disposed, others terrorized into reporting all our words and deeds. At first the web was not too tight. The Russians had more important things to do. They knew that we could not stray very far. And they had to continue their advance, even while German bombers now returned nightly.

STRANGE COINCIDENCES

Unexplainable things sometimes happened. The window of my room faced a house commandeered by the Russians, some fifty yards away. A bit further on, near the University, was a small park that led to the center of town. I had gone to bed about 10 o'clock and was awakened by a bombing raid. The next morning, as I started to shave I noticed something unusual: there were stone fragments on the windowsill and in the courtyard. I went out and noticed a hole about five inches from the window. I got a ladder and went up look at the cornice, where I found an unexploded shell, with Russian markings. Five inches closer and it would have landed in bed with me. Later I thought about

this event and others which always seemed to serve the interests of the N.K.V.D.

Another example: in Odessa there was an Italian consul who had been at his post for some twenty years. In his old age, he wanted to return home. He applied for and obtained a visa. On the eve of his departure, some friends gave him a *bon voyage* party. As he returned home he encountered a band of thieves who attacked and robbed him. They beat him so unmercifully that he died there on the sidewalk. The police investigated but, of course, could not find the culprits. The consul was given a grandiose funeral. It was now sure that he would never be able to reveal the events of his experience of twenty years.

I often visited his grave in Odessa. The central cross is flanked by white marble columns in the form of fasces, an axe surrounded by rods, the symbol of the lictors of the old Roman Empire and the emblem of the political party so despised by the Soviets as reactionary and counter-revolutionary.

I recall vividly a street argument by urchins calling each other names. One of them, in a wild flight of imagination, left his adversary speechless with just two words: "You fascist!"

Another "accident," just as curious as that of the consul, was that of Msgr. Romza, a Ukrainian bishop. One morning, he was told by the police to go in his car to some place or other. As he was pulling out of his yard, a tank which was passing on the street crashed into his car. The bishop was only slightly wounded, but there his good fortune ended. Somehow he got himself in the path of a stream of bullets.

There were many such freak accidents, so many that one wondered whether they were really accidents.

NEIGHBORS AND VISITORS

There was no point in closing our eyes to the possibility that our rectory, so lovingly repaired in recent months, might be commandeered. We decided to convert part of the church basement into three or four rooms that could serve as kind of refuge. At the outset, our tenants, Vassia/Ksenia shared the quarters with our sacristan, a fine old Polish lady, a Franciscan Missionary whom the Revolution had reduced to the lay state and a life of solitude. She cleaned the church, washed the linens, placed flowers, made candles and hosts. She was ready to help us in any way, until her death in January, 1954.

Vassia was mobilized in the very first days. He did not go very far, for three weeks later he was wounded in Hungary and returned to Odessa to convalesce. I loved to go to their apartment and chat with them. My knowledge of Russian was still very superficial and made Vassia laugh. But it was excellent practice for me. He and his wife gave me useful advice about details of daily living, what to buy, how to behave towards the people. One of their recommendations really shocked me at the time, but I lived to see how well founded it was.

“You must be very careful,” they said, “when the neighbors’ children come to your house. You might not realize it, but they see everything, touch everything, and ask questions that THEY have put into their mouths. You can be certain of one thing: there is no worse, or, if you like, no better spy than a child.” Later on, I realized that their remark was well founded.

On Mardi Gras, 1945, we had organized a tea party for the members of our choir. Svetlana, a seven-year old neighbor, often came into the yard to play with other children. In the kitchen, she had noticed the preparations and wanted to go upstairs and check what was going on. We did not allow this and she stomped away, yelling menacingly: “It doesn’t matter...I know where to go AND what to say ...”

The kids who hung around the rectory were especially interested in knowing what we ate. Later on, at our trial, our simple fare was said to be far above average and was denounced as proof of our “bourgeois and parasitic/?” and our modest tea party was transformed into “a shameful orgy.”

Erik was nine, quick and intelligent, and always asking questions, many of them obviously beyond the interests of a child his age. Our answers became very prudent, especially after Ksenia’s warning. Yet it would have seemed suspicious if we had stopped the children from coming.

We also discovered that some of our altar boys had been told to report our words and actions. Those interested would then interpret the stories as they wished. By the time we found out all this, it was too late.

About mid-April, 1944, a man knocked at our door. He had a package under his arm. “I am a partisan,” he explained, “and I often have to be away. Could you do something for me?” And he unwrapped the package and showed us a magnificent trombone. “Please keep this for me until I can return and reclaim it.” He came back, several times, chatted at length with Fr. Leoni, and checked on his instrument. (That was the official version.) He came back a final time just a few days before our arrest.

On another occasion, two teen-agers came to the rectory. “We heard that an Italian priest lived here. We’re Italians too. Could we speak to him?” After a rather lengthy visit, Fr. Leoni said to me, “There must be millions of such ‘Italians’ in the U.S.S.R. I hope they know their Party affairs better than their Italian grammar.”

One Sunday morning, just before Mass at the Polish church, a Soviet captain pushed his way through the crowd and came into the sacristy. He seemed very upset. “I am from the Caucasus; my mother was a Catholic and had me baptized. I would like to talk to a priest.” An appointment

was made for the next day. The man stayed on for Mass. When he came to see us, we were very much on our guard. At first there was only small talk. Then he wanted to know how we felt about things. He seemed to deplore the Soviet attitude toward religion, and spoke about current rumors discrediting the clergy, the general contempt in which priests were held, and gave several examples of this. In short, he tried to provoke some angry reaction from us.

Finally, no longer able to contain himself, he shouted, “Why don’t you say something! Don’t these stories make your blood boil?”

“What you have told us is nothing new,” said Fr. Leoni quietly. He went on to explain that our point of view was exclusively Christian and was on a higher plane than these incidentals. Our only concern was to work for the good of all the poor people who came to see us.

The officer said that he had been charmed by his visit and the conversation, and he promised to come and see us when he was next in Odessa. He did come back some months later and re-enacted the same little play. He was probably ordered to pursue his inquiries, but he had not changed his method of approach.

RUFFLED FEELINGS

One visitor was always welcome. Pastor of a Pravoslav church, he was an elderly man with a graying beard who had, at one time, spent five years in the prison camps, for having cut down trees in the forest. He did not like to recall these days.

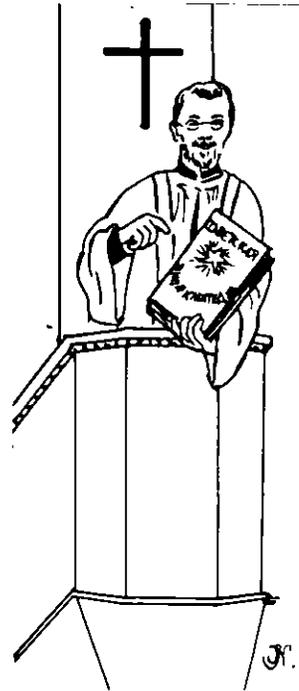
He came once or twice a week, and his conversation was always lively and interesting. He was obviously a cultured man, and we felt that he was also a man of great zeal. It was on his advice that we went to pay our respects to the Orthodox bishop of Odessa, who received us warmly but a bit too officially. We were even invited to a luncheon given for all the Orthodox priests of the city. The bishop accepted to have lunch in

our refectory, along with two or three of his priests. Cordial relations soon deteriorated, however. Our old friend, the pastor, kept us informed about the evolution of the situation.

At Sunday office, Fr. Leoni used to explain Christian dogma and morals. He spoke incisively, persuasively, even violently, but always prudently, given our very special situation. The faithful listened avidly, and the “special envoys” of the police and of the Orthodox Church listened even more avidly. Things went along quite well until Father mentioned the characteristic marks of the Catholic Church. The Bishop had ordered that in all the churches of his diocese a series of conferences be given, attacking the Catholic Church and the Papacy. Our friend kept us abreast of all that was said in the Orthodox churches: a regular controversy was developing.

One Sunday, Fr. Leoni went into the pulpit with a large dictionary under his arm.

“Attempts have been made recently to represent Pope Pius XII as the ally of Hitler and Fascism. I have here,” he said, “an answer to these attacks, from a witness that is certainly not prejudiced in favor of the Catholic Church. I have here the last pre-war edition of the Soviet Encyclopedia, and I would like to read to you the article entitled “Vatican.” He then proceeded to read the article, which was quite objective and full of praise for the stand which the Pope, as Papal Nuncio in Berlin, had taken against National Socialism.



It might be argued that Father had acted imprudently, but he was certainly courageous. The “special envoys” were fuming and we heard rumors that the Bishop even appealed to the police to get rid of “certain

embarrassing people.” in any event, the dossier at our trial had many pages on this particular point.

The Bishop, however, did make a gesture of reconciliation: in the interests of peace and harmony, he invited us to join the Orthodox Church!

THE ROAD BACK

During the summer of 1944, a group of about fifty Polish women, with their children, passed through Odessa. Their thin, tired faces only hinted at their sad story.

They told us that they were a special contingent, victims of a quaint Soviet custom of transporting the population of entire districts to some other part of the country, sometimes thousands of miles away, to work in forced labor camps. “We were in the middle of the *taiga* (Siberian forest),” they said. “The work was hard and all we had as lodgings was a *zemlianka* (a hole in the ground covered over by branches). Let’s not even talk about the food. We were not allowed to go more than a mile from the place to which we had been assigned. Most of the people of our village died in the camp or along the road. Now they tell us that we can return home. After two years, what is there to go to?”

These poor people stayed in Odessa, and the Polish members of the parish tried their best to help them.

OPEN HOUSE

Our first surprise visit from the police was on June 24, 1944. It was the feast of Saint John, my patron saint, and some of my friends had sent a little extra food for the occasion. In the middle of our meal, the outside door was flung open and a man dashed in, rushed down the hall, peered into the neighboring room, ran past us into the kitchen, and finally

returned to where we were sitting. He was out of breath. He glanced at our table and whistled, from admiration or envy.

“Well,” he said, “food rationing doesn’t seem to cause any hardship here. I’m looking for Mr. So-and-So. I was told he lived here.”

“There’s no one by that name here.”

“Well then, excuse me.” Then he left. It had been just a pretext for a lightning inspection.

However unpleasant these daytime visits might have been, they were far less annoying than the nighttime visits. We had been told about the robberies committed by bandits who pretended to be policemen, in order to have the doors opened. We were often disturbed in the wee hours by shouts and knocking on the doors of neighboring houses: *Otkroi* (Open up).

Then came our turn: the gate of the grille in the courtyard was shaken for more than an hour. When the locks and chains proved too strong, the marauders went away.

The next time was more serious. We were awakened about two o’clock and it seemed as if a regular battering ram was being used on the gate. Fr. Leoni and I wondered what would become of us. Then, something must have given way, because we heard a gang of men coming up the path, past the church and to our door. I went down and asked for an explanation. “Open up! This is a patrol.” They would have broken down the door, so I let them in. They really were a Shore Patrol. The officer in charge apparently considered this manner of entry the most natural thing in the world. He wanted to control our passports; so we went upstairs and he checked them. Then he told us that his patrol had been detailed to round up a certain “Black Cat Gang” which had terrorized the neighborhood, dressed as sailors.

He would have done better had he not disturbed us. But to understand such nerve-wracking events, one would have to have lived in that dear land.

Still in the summer of 1944, the scene was repeated, at 3:00 A.M. The same uproar, the same battering at the gate. But this time it was not properly closed and they got in more easily. They were not sailors but two policemen and four or five teenagers dressed in civilian clothes and carrying carbines. The latter took up positions that cut off all access to the stairs and corridor, and the officers announced that they had been ordered to search the premises. For two hours they ransacked the contents of drawers and the library, asking endless questions. Finally one of them held up a small school atlas which I had bought a few days before in the bazaar. He said we had no right to have maps. They got ready to leave and one of them turned to me and said: "Get dressed. You must come with me."

During all this time the other policeman had been turning over in his hand my morocco-bound breviaries. I could almost hear him thinking how he could make a fine wallet from the leather. Probably it was only the presence of the other officer that stopped him from stealing them.

I put on my civilian clothes and went downstairs, under the watchful eyes of the youths. At this hour of the night, the streets were almost deserted. They led me to a house some distance away, which during the Occupation had been the residence of the Rumanian Orthodox bishop. Now it was used as a "K.Z.P." a house of detention for those awaiting trial. I was brought into a room where there were seven or eight people, men and women. An old man, half-paralyzed, kept wailing "What could I have ever done to them?"

People only whispered to each other, while the youths took up positions on the veranda. Around noon, our cook brought me some lunch, but I was not allowed to speak to her. In the afternoon, I was led

into a small office to be questioned about my identity, my reasons for being in Odessa, my activities, etc. That night each of the prisoners found some little spot, made ourselves as comfortable as possible on the floor, and tried to sleep. The next morning, at about ten o'clock, I was informed that I could go home.

MORE TENANTS

In 1945, our situation became more delicate. True, we were able to move around freely and carry out our ministry. Everything seemed normal in this respect, but the annoying incidents were increasing. Almost no day passed without some official or other calling upon us. A man from the mayor's office had a questionnaire to be filled out, or he had to make an inspection. Then the Housing Authority issued a claim for rent for the rectory. We protested that when we had arrived the building was an uninhabitable ruin. Our expenses for repairs amounted to more than several years' rent. We received a typical Soviet reply: You have repaired the house and we thank you. But each of you has a right to only twelve square meters of living space. We are allowing the two of you to have thirty-five, without obliging you to have other tenants in your rooms. That is all that we can do. You must pay us so much for each square meter."

Another day, it was the tax collector, who wanted a schedule of our fees so that he could assess our income tax. He was amazed that we received no salary for our services and that we lived on donations. Yet he estimated an approximate minimum. We would be taxed on seven rubles per month.

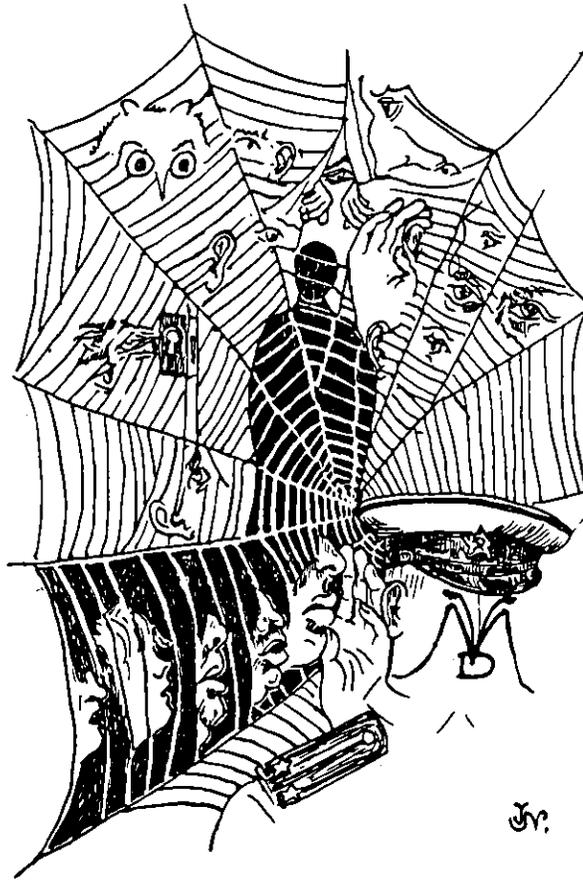
We had to keep the door locked because of a persistent and mysterious character. He wore civilian clothes but had on a military greatcoat without insignia. He must have come at least twenty times,

wanting at all costs to find out how many rooms were available for other tenants.

Finally, one day while we were out a colonel of the N.K.V.D. came. He signed a form officially requisitioning two rooms for some women soldiers under his command. When we returned from the large church, we were dismayed to find that all our downstairs furniture had been thrown out into the yard. Our new tenants had already set up house. We had no cooking facilities upstairs. After some negotiation, we effected a compromise. We would share the kitchen, not an unusual custom in the U.S.S.R. We also got the small room beside it as a dining room.

I merely mention all those countless visitors, police agents in disguise, who used every pretext and every known method of provocation to elicit from us some remark which could be interpreted as “anti-Soviet and counter-revolutionary.” These *agents provocateurs* were our greatest trial. Fear caused us to distrust even our best friends.

We no longer felt safe even in the confessional. The fear of informers, the constant feeling of being spied upon, the impossibility of speaking freely to a friend, the surveillance by secret police agents—all these things created an atmosphere that was poisonous and stifling. I breathed it everywhere during my eleven years in “paradise.” Free in Odessa, prisoner in Moscow, in the camps of Central Asia or in the Far North, in my life as a “free” workman...it was the same everywhere. And this impression was shared by others. Yet no one dared speak of the mental anguish it caused us. Such an admission would have been cause for condemnation.



CHAPTER FIVE

TIME RUNS OUT

GOOD WORK

Even amid our difficulties, some good work was being done. We were kept busy and we thanked God that our people could be helped by our ministry. We were elated in being able to steer our ship even amid the storms. The hostile waves against us only strengthened our resolution to steer the course we had set upon.

Several times each week, Fr. Leoni taught catechism to the youngsters. Visiting the sick took up a lot of our time. And too often we had to bury the dead. These poor people were undernourished and the mortality rate was very high.

Every day many faithful came to pray, attend Mass and receive Holy Communion. Confessions were numerous. There were even more people at evening devotions.

Sundays were especially busy. In front of the church, a couple dozen beggars asked for alms, while the people arrived for Mass. Inside, every seat was taken. The choir sang beautifully, both polyphonic music and plain chant, as well as some Polish hymns. Such hymns pleased me greatly. Fr. Leoni's sermons were listened to very attentively. After Mass, the people would chat with us or among themselves. In short, it was the normal life of a parish, with its duties and cares, but also with its consolations.

Given our exceptional circumstances, we could administer the sacrament of Confirmation. Before his departure, Bishop Glazer had

entrusted to us the Holy Oils. Amid scenes of great fervor a group of children and several adults were confirmed.

FOR OUR WOUNDED, PLEASE

Busy as we were with parish duties, we had to remember that we were living on Soviet territory during war time. The Orthodox churches had had a general collection for the benefit of wounded soldiers. The official in charge of Religious Groups came to inform us that we had to do likewise. The collection money had to be handed in on Monday at a certain office. One day, I had to wait quite a while in this office while a lady gave a class in Marxism to a group of Young Pioneers, with their red neckerchiefs. She came over to ask me why I was waiting and I explained that I was bringing contributions for the wounded. A few moments later, I heard her say, with great emphasis, "Above all, children, never show any consideration for the Church!"

THE CLERGY ARE PARASITES

After all the attempts to suppress "obscurantist superstition" in the minds of these people, one is rather surprised to find belief in luck and the evil eye. Many regarded us as the omen of misfortune, which could be averted only by observing an elaborate ritual. If we went on the street in our cassock, people would immediately cross the street, while they twisted a button on their coat. At first this made me laugh. It reminded me of my childhood days in the country, watching the chickens run away as a vehicle approached. After a while, however, it became annoying.

My cassock also caused a bit of misunderstanding one night. I was walking along a poorly lighted street. Behind me I heard rapid footsteps. I looked back and saw two soldiers following me. I continued on my way, but they were gaining on me. I could hear passionate appeals,

endearing terms. Finally they caught up with me and turned away in disgust. "It's a dress all right, but not the kind we wanted."

To avoid such incidents, I got into the habit of dressing as a layman, except when engaged in priestly duties. Even so, I was often stopped by civilians or soldiers and asked for my identity papers. Once a man made me go to a military check-point. There a captain re-checked my papers and said, "Who are you? What do you do?" He was amazed at what I told him. "There are so many useful jobs that you could do. I am an officer. My work is useful. You are still young and strong. Why have you adopted such a useless profession? You priests are just parasites." He shrugged his shoulders, and said to the guard at the door, "Let the priest go."

TO WORK

Denying as they do the existence of the supernatural, such people accept only material values. All work must benefit the community in some way. Often the workers of some organization or of some district would be called upon to give up their weekly day of rest to go on an *oudarnik*, fatigue duty, more or less voluntary and entirely unpaid. It could be ordered for such unscheduled tasks as clearing away bomb sites. I must admit that in such cases the people worked hard, amid singing, laughter and jokes.

Since the return of the Russians, much work was being done in Odessa. The authorities' priority was for the factories in the immediate suburban area. This was no small undertaking, because the demolition had been carried relentlessly. Materials were scarce and spare parts were almost non-existent. I often admired the persistence of these Russian workmen who could find use for many things which we at home would have scrapped.

WHITE BREAD, BLACK MARKET

It was not long before the city's three famous bread factories were back in production. The bread was very dark and the ration cards were not very generous. White bread could be obtained only in the black market and it was too costly for us.

The great metal-works also came back to life. After a day's work, many workers sought a second job. They used to say, "We have to take a second job on the side because the cost of living is high and the salaries are..." A shake of the head completed the sentence which, already, they thought too daring.

The cost of living was indeed high. Bread was rationed in the State stores at a fixed price of 90 kopeks a kilogram. But you could get anything you wanted in the recently re-opened markets, or in the famous bazaar. In the spring of 1944, a huge food supermarket had opened, right in the center of town, with meat, fish, sausages, wine, vegetables, fruit, pastries, tobacco, etc. In the display window of this *gastronom*, the wares and their prices were shown. The buyer had to go to the department in which he was interested, calculate the price of his purchases, go to a cashier and pay in advance. He received a voucher and the saleswoman gave him merchandise for the sum paid. But who could afford the *gastronom* price? A pack of *Kasbek* cigarettes, sold to foreigners at an Intourist hotel for 14 rubles (already a high price), but at the *gastronom* it cost 80 rubles. And it was the same for everything else. A worker who received a monthly salary of 300 to 400 rubles could not afford to patronize the *gastronom*. Only the wives of officers, of civil servants or Party members, or big blackmarketees could shop there. Lesser mortals had to be content with looking enviously at the wares and remarking, as a teen-ager once whispered to me, "At least little kids can see what our grandparents used to eat."

Ordinary people did their buying in the market or in the bazaar. In the market, the stalls were in charge of the official butchers or of the collective farms. Even fish was sold in this way. At that time, the price of a kilo of meat was about 100 rubles.

In the bazaar, some stalls were under official control, but most others had kept, from the days of the Occupation, a certain independence. They were tolerated, provided they paid a monthly tax, payable in advance. Sometimes they had to pay as much as 12,000 rubles for two or three square meters of floor space. This was the theory, but often, after a few days, they got a bill for an additional 12,000 rubles. The system easily brought about the disappearance of stalls and the bankruptcy of the owner.

ALL KINDS OF BUSINESS

Legally, private stall-holders in the bazaar could sell only *V* second-hand goods such as clothes, furniture, tableware, etc., and for this privilege there was a minimum tax of five rubles. Resale of new merchandise purchased at the state stores was strictly forbidden. However, new but homemade articles could be sold. Amid the pushing, jostling crowd, speculation and swindle were rife. At almost every step, somebody was liable to stop you and pull some enticing bargain from under his coat. One had to be very wary when dealing with such salesmen. A can of meat, apparently untampered with, could bring to your table 500 grams of earth. The delicate scent of a bottle of perfume, unobtainable in stores, could be irresistible to a woman shopper. Later she would discover that only the cork had been doctored with a sweet-smelling paste and that the bottle contained only water. I could give many other examples of such cheating.

One day I witnessed a priceless example of the kind of trickery that went on. A soldier went up to a second-hand clothes stall. With a great

show of secrecy, he began to dicker with the woman in charge. She hesitated for a moment and began to argue. The man became more insistent. Apparently a deal was made and he drew from under his coat a bundle of military clothing. The woman paid him. A few moments later, an officer demanded to know what the man had sold. "I saw everything," he said, "I shall denounce you to the police for buying military property." At first the lady denied everything, but eventually was obliged to hand over the package. Naturally the officer did not refund her money. Meanwhile, a short distance away, the soldier waited for the officer, who returned his bundle. They went off to repeat the swindle in another corner of the bazaar. That night the two would surely be able drink their vodka!

KSENIA'S NOSE

Our neighbor experienced another kind of rip-off. Tiotia Ksenia never left her house without, on the threshold, making a triple sign of the Cross, after having checked that no one could see her. From my window I could see her doing so. Each morning, she would go shopping and bring back her purchases wrapped in a sheet of newsprint. I must say that in Russia almost no newspapers can be freely bought. Ordinary people want them less for their news value than for their usefulness in making cigarettes. So they were avidly sought in the bazaar. Ksenia would bring back a quantity of *makhorka*, a kind of harsh tobacco that would give a cheap smoke. It could be rolled only in newspaper and had an acrid taste.

Ksenia and her husband smoked from morning until night, and this must have strained their budget.

One day I saw her return from the bazaar, very upset. What had happened?

She said, "As I was doing my shopping, I noticed a band of urchins, 12 to 15 years old. They are really organized bandits. They zeroed in on



an old lady selling something from a basket, and while one fellow distracted her another snatched her basket and ran away. She was only a couple of steps away from me and I couldn't avoid crying out 'My God!'. A third fellow right next to me spat in my eye, and they all split up even before I could wipe away the spittle. The poor old lady kept crying out. But who could help her? I was lucky, because often these brigands use other means to silence witnesses to their exploits, for instance by cutting your nose with a razor blade. Can you imagine me in that situation!" I couldn't avoid laughing, because Ksenia had a nose where a razor blade could have cut a lot of furrows without their ever meeting.

EVEN THE DEAD

These teen-age gangs sometimes offered goods from just about everywhere. But it is impossible to list the sources of their supply. If I had not myself been a witness of the event below, I would not have believed it myself.

One of our French ladies had died in the suburbs where she had managed to keep for herself a few of the rooms in the vast mansion which she had once owned. We were bringing her to the cemetery.

According to the Russian custom, the coffin lid is closed only when the body is being lowered into the grave. I had barely finished the blessing when, to my horror, I saw two or three women brandishing scissors approach the casket. They began to slash into the beautiful dress and shoes in which the woman had been laid out. Then the coffin cover was closed. Troubled by the event, I asked for an explanation.

One of the women came over to me and said, "If we had not done that, worse would have happened. Last year a parishioner had buried his wife, and the very next day he found that the clothes she had been buried in were for sale in the bazaar." And that is not the only case. After each burial, the ragamuffins come looking for "bargains." Every night they rob the graves of the dead for whatever can be of use to the living: dentures, jewelry, clothing. Fortunately the desecration of tombs stops there and the age and sex of the dead does not lead to worse crimes.



BLACK MARKET BY THE WAR WOUNDED

Disabled war veterans rolled about the fringes of the bazaar in their wheelchairs. The police looked the other way as these invalids bought and sold silver and gold objects and exchanged foreign currency. Our old sacristan got sixty rubles to the dollar for a five dollar bill that someone had given her years before.

I remember a Rumanian who had missed the last train back home and was forced to stay in Odessa. Somehow he obtained a supply of copybooks which he sold to schoolchildren, at a time when the bazaar was the only place where these things could be bought. This Rumanian came to see me almost every day and tell me about his encounters with the police. He had been arrested five times but had been released each time. In early 1945 he said to me: "You have no idea of the interest the police are taking in you. They know that I see you and already are asking all kinds of questions about you. Be prudent."

PRUDENCE IS NOT ENOUGH

I was prudent and confined myself solely to my pastoral duties. But it became clear at the outset of 1945 that the net was closing in around us. A Frenchwoman who had been our cook for some years was summoned every Friday and had to report on us. The police blackmailed her because during the Occupation she had been an active anti-Soviet. When they had no longer any use for her or she refused to spy for them any longer, she was arrested, tried, and sentenced to ten years in concentration camp and all her goods confiscated.

Another Frenchwoman took her place, but after a few weeks she preferred to leave us rather than do what the police wanted from her. Our Russian neighbors also were called to the N.K.V.D. on all kinds of

pretexts. I am convinced that they too were “worked over” in preparation for our arrest being prepared in the secrecy of the police headquarters in Bebel street.

FROM PARADE TO PRISON

During the last phase of the war, the advance of the Russians into Poland and East Prussia led to the liberation of many prisoners of war. Until the fall of Berlin and the meeting of the Allied troops on the Oder, Odessa became the gathering place for many former war prisoners. I was there for the return of several hundred Russian ex-P.O.W.'s liberated by the American troops. The harbor was jammed with several thousand people. An honor guard surrounded a big truck on which was mounted a large picture of Stalin, surrounded by flags. Youngsters ran about yelling “They’re coming! They’re coming!” Dressed in brand-new khaki uniforms, a few hundred former prisoners marched in ranks of four, and formed a huge square in front of the truck. A band played the Soviet anthem. A colonel mounted the truck and spoke enthusiastically of the joy of the Fatherland at seeing its sons again, of the confidence that the Nation and the Party had in them, etc. He was sure that they, having repelled the invaders, would now do everything in their power to bind up the wounds their country had suffered. The national anthem was played again. While the crowd cheered, N.K.V.D. troops quietly surrounded the ex-P.O.W.s. After the parade was over, they were hauled off to prison, judged as traitors and sentenced to ten years in concentration camp for having allowed themselves to be captured, and for not having kept their last bullet for themselves. Later on, in the camps, I met thousands of these former soldiers who cursed their fate.

As for the Moldavian peasants, they were taken from their homes, split into groups and marched through the city by guards with machine guns. They were forced to work as longshoremen, scarcely allowed time

to breathe by their overseers. If their quota of work was met, there was a bonus, not for them, but for the guards. When they returned home in the evening, some women would try to slip them a bit of food, in exchange for a bar of soap or some other small thing they had managed to pick up. Poor people!

REPATRIATES

You can imagine my feelings when I first saw in the streets of Odessa some European soldiers. The first ones had been two English officers, members of a group of English troops who had been the first ones to sail back home.

It had taken some months to clear the port of Odessa for shipping. The Germans had laid their minefields very thoroughly and clearing the harbor was a tedious and dangerous task. Our rectory was near the docks and every time a mine was exploded our house shook. This part of Odessa was practically the only one through which P.O.W.s, French, Belgian, Canadian, Dutch, could be repatriated. They were grouped in schools and in large villas, surrounded by parks, for some 3 or 4 miles along the coast. They stayed there a week or two while waiting for ships. In theory, they were not supposed to leave their quarters, but in practice they bribed or fooled their guards.

As soon as I saw some of my compatriots, I cried out to them but was quickly silenced by a Russian lieutenant who accompanied them. I began to take steps to be able to contact these soldiers and organize religious services for them. I was told to see a certain colonel, who gave me a permit which had to be stamped each time I wanted to enter the camp. But he grumbled all the while, "At least nobody will be able to say later on that permission was refused." If it had depended only on him, he would have sent me to Hell.

WHY AN INTERPRETER?

We finally managed to organize Sunday services in the main camps. I sometimes met people from my part of France, or people who knew someone I also knew. I would quietly slip them letters to my relatives or friends. Later, this would become one of the main reasons why I was accused of espionage.

Soon after this influx of ex-prisoners-of-war, Allied Military Missions came to Odessa and were given accommodations in the Intourist London Hotel, the only decent hotel in the city. I had the occasion to meet with these men a number of times, in connection with my work. This too would be part of the case against me during my trial. These gentlemen, except for a doctor, knew no Russian. So their meetings were conducted in French, with a girl, dressed in military uniform, as the interpreter for the N.K.V.D. representative. The Mission's work did not always run smoothly; occasionally, in the temporary absence of the girl, our visitors relieved their feelings by a few scathing remarks about the Russian officer. He just sat there, expressionless.

One Saturday evening I had to see the Allied Mission before making arrangements for Sunday services. They were out, inspecting the neighborhood. So I sat in a dark corridor and waited for them. Who passed by but the N.K.V.D. officer and the interpreter, in good spirits and jabbering away...in French!

FRENCH MILITARY MASS

Among the liberated prisoners was a French chaplain, Father Maupome. He had received permission to stay in Odessa as long as French soldiers were there. He left with the last convoy. As we shared the same work, he used to come and visit me. After we were arrested, he

managed to visit all the churches and save the Eucharist from profanation.

Some of the older prisoners, after 5 or 6 years in German camps, would arrive sick and exhausted. I had to bury five of them. Three times Soviet soldiers came to fetch me by truck to the cemetery for the ceremonies. The chaplain buried others, who had arrived too ill to make it back home.

As Easter, 1945, neared, we had a lot of work, but we wanted our soldiers to have a fine feast. After many meetings with the Soviet authorities and the soldiers, we were able to organize a Solemn High Mass in the large church. The soldiers, led by a seminarian, took care of the singing. The members of the Allied Mission, the First Secretary of the French Embassy in Moscow, and even some Russian officers were in the front rows. The parades of the soldiers through the streets, and their meeting in front of the church had naturally aroused the curiosity of the public. The chaplain and I said a few words. It was one of the best moments I had experienced in Odessa.

PASCHAL PROCESSION

The same day, before the ceremony for the soldiers, our parish had experienced moments of great joy, quite in contrast with the nightmare of 1944.

In January, for the feast of St. John, the Orthodox had received permission to organize a gigantic procession for the Blessing of the Waters on the Odessa River. Remembering this precedent, we requested permission to have a procession outside the church. The permission was granted. All my parishioners donned their best clothes, carried banners and lighted candles, and the children strewed flowers before the Blessed Sacrament. Three times we processed around the church property. The people prayed fervently. Many people had gathered to watch, many, I am

sure, completely mystified by the proceedings. It was a splendid day, and we didn't realize that we were only a few steps away from the abyss.

OUR KIND PARISHIONERS

Before coming to the story of the painful days that were to follow, I must allow my grateful thoughts to rest for a moment on our dear, faithful people. Not only did they provide us with the material necessities of life; they gave us tremendous moral support by their courage and spirit in the face of difficulties.

It would be impossible to record all their acts of generosity. Often we did not know whom to thank for the gifts of potatoes, or rice, or fruit that they left in the kitchen during our absence. These gestures were all the more touching because we were well aware of the poverty of our parishioners. But I must mention especially one lady whose husband owned his own bakery when the Rumanians were there. She brought us bread every day even after the return of the Russians, when their business was under cooperative control. To this day I do not know how she managed it. It was like a fairy tale, where invisible hands quietly took care of all our needs.

BICYCLING WITH CRUTCHES

After Easter, life seemed to go on as usual, although there always seemed to be some stranger or other roaming near our house. And if I tried to speak to some acquaintance in town, a "controller" of conversation popped up out of nowhere.

One day, when I was near the docks with my Rumanian friend, he drew my attention to a fellow passing on a bicycle. "Note him well," he said, "only yesterday he was dragging himself along on crutches outside your house, with one leg bent up under him like a regular cripple." I

attached little importance to the matter, but I soon guessed that he was a police spy.

Another day, I was standing on the sidewalk outside our house watching some Belgian and French soldiers, with flags flying, march down to the harbor. I noticed two men coming from the other direction. I didn't hear what they were saying but their gestures and laughter made me uneasy. I felt they were talking about me. Two days later, I had time to realize it was true.

YOUR PAPERS!

April 29, 1945 was a Sunday and as usual we were very busy. I had gone out early to settle something with the President of the French ladies, before the 9 o'clock Mass. The streets were bustling with shoppers. I met the lady and was on my way back to the church. Suddenly a thick-set, strong-looking man stepped out of a doorway and said to me "Show me your identity papers." "Here they are," I said. I had been through this routine a number of times before and I thought I had nothing to worry about. But besides the bad manners of the man I



noticed something else. While examining my papers, he leaned against me. Immediately a black limousine drew alongside and a door opened. The man ordered me "Kindly get into the car."

ELEVEN YEARS... IN PARADISE!

The door slammed shut before I realized that an important drama of my life was taking place. Very simply, I had just ceased to be a free man.

CHAPTER SIX

GOODBYE FREEDOM!

YOU'RE UNDER ARREST

It seemed that the car had scarcely started when it stopped and I was ordered to get out. We had traveled only a few hundred meters and were now at police headquarters in Bebel Street. I still did not realize my true situation. I thought this was just a routine check and that I would soon be free to return to the church for the 9 o'clock Mass.

I was escorted up a few steps and ushered into the office of the Chief of Police. He was a stocky man in his mid-thirties and was standing, feet apart, hands in pockets, with a malicious smile that was not very reassuring.

“Well, my dear colleague, how are you?”

“I don't understand.”

“It's quite clear,” he retorted, “I am a spy and you are a spy. But I am cleverer than you. You did not trap me; I trapped you.”

“I still don't understand what you're talking about.”

“That doesn't matter. You'll understand when you get 'upstairs.' Meanwhile it is my duty to inform you that you are under arrest.”

His words made no great impression on me at the time. I told myself that I knew that sooner or later it would happen.

Without taking his eyes off me, he handed me a sheet of paper.
“Sign here.”

“Wait until I read what it says.”

“Take your time,” he said.

According to the paper, the “accused” was arrested for espionage on behalf of a foreign country and for anti-Soviet activities. I told him I would not sign. He explained to me that the sole purpose of the document was to attest to the fact that I had been notified of my arrest. The rest would be explained to me ‘upstairs’ later.

So I signed. Then the officer and another man who was in the room came over to me and took from me everything that was not in keeping with my new status. Following the custom of Stalin’s soldiers in countries they “liberated,” they took away my watch, my pen, my almost new briefcase (which seemed to appeal to the officer), my wallet, my belt, my shoelaces, my rosary and my little crucifix. All I had left was my handkerchief.

I decided to request a receipt for the articles they had confiscated. That was legal, but seemed to annoy the officer. “We’ll have to see if it complicates things ‘upstairs.’” “Twice now they had mentioned “upstairs,” and I didn’t know just what they meant.

They gave me a receipt for the crucifix and rosary as well as for my watch “In white metal.” To this I objected “With this receipt, I could be given any kind of rubbish. My watch is silver and it has a number and trademark. Write down these details.”

With very bad grace, the Chief complied. Evidently there was some kind of fear of “upstairs.”

Then I had to go into another room, occupied by women soldiers, including the tenants we had been forced to take into the rectory. One of them stifled a laugh as she saw me come in. After the usual formalities, I was ushered out, and as soon as we were in the corridor my guard hissed “Quick, turn your face toward the wall, in this corner.”

I remained that way for a couple of minutes, hands behind my back. People passed behind me and I smiled as I remembered how my parents had made me stand in a corner because of some childish prank.

We went downstairs, then upstairs, then back down, across a dirty courtyard. Finally I was put in a large, bare room, with windows three-quarters blacked out. I began to realize what had happened to me. My life in Odessa had been scrupulously dedicated to my ministry; the global accusation against me reminded me that the early Christians had suffered for their faith, and had rejoiced in doing so. I was innocent of any crime and I found it consoling that my present predicament was somewhat similar to theirs.

THE FIRST SEARCH

After about an hour my pacing around the room was interrupted by the arrival of one of those civilians wearing military greatcoats whom I had noticed so often in recent weeks.

“Undress completely and pile all your clothes in the middle of the room,” he ordered.

This was only the first of an almost endless series of searches that I had to endure during the years. More than any other prison procedure, it seemed designed to degrade and humiliate a person. It revealed the Intentions of the captors to consider us as objects, numbers, or even as slaves. Once he had finished his work, the man said to me, “Get dressed. Being in prison isn’t so bad, is it?”

FIRST NIGHT IN PRISON

When he had gone, I resumed my pacing. As time went on I got tired and hungry. I heard footsteps in the corridor and caught a faint odor of soup. Then there was only silence. And my door stayed closed. I was tired and wanted to sit down, but there wasn’t a stick of furniture in the room. It never occurred to me, dressed in my cassock, to sit on the floor.

I had noticed in the corner of the room a cylindrical iron object covered by a board. Out of curiosity I lifted the lid. The smell instantly told me what it was. I decided to resign myself to the situation and await developments.

About six o'clock a cot was brought in and placed in the middle of the room, right beneath the light. Finally I could sit down! Shortly afterwards, the door opened and a couple of Mongol soldiers appeared. They spoke rapidly; though I could catch some of the words, I did not understand what they were saying. So the two of them got together and with many gesticulations tried again. I understood that they were asking if I would like some tea. I said yes. I had not had even a drop of water since the night before.

Obviously pleased at having made themselves understood, one of them smilingly handed me an old tin can that had once contained some kind of meat. Now it was rusty and battered, and had traces of fat in the corners. The other man lifted his jug and poured out a generous helping of hot water. In spite of my thirst I felt disappointed. "Do you call this tea? It's nothing but water in a stinking tin can." But I drank it. And the Mongol, still beaming, asked if I wanted more. I declined his offer; I just couldn't stand another cup.

Towards nine o'clock I was told that I could go to bed but that I had to keep my head toward the door. The events of the day had left me tense and strained, and the strong light just above my cot kept me from sleeping. I was still awake when my former tenants, the women soldiers, looked through the peephole of my door and went away, whispering and laughing.

On Monday morning, April 30, I was given a chunk of bread and a container of water, cleaner this time. The 450 grams of bread was my ration for the day, but after the complete fast of the previous day, it made just one mouthful for me. Let the future take care of itself, I thought.

Events moved quickly. I was brought to the office of Kusnietsov, the Chief, who was still gloating. “Well, how goes it?” He began his questioning and it soon became apparent that he wanted me to furnish proof of the case he had built against me. I am afraid that I gave him no help. For a third time he referred to “upstairs.” Then he asked me whether I needed something from the rectory. I asked for my civilian clothes, some underwear, and some food. At noon I was given a few spoonfuls of boiled barley; that was the last I saw anyone until night.

I was waiting for the signal to go to bed, when the door opened and someone said “Take all your belongings and follow me.” I was taken to a room where five or six policemen were standing around. Without speaking a word, one of them handed me a piece of bread, about a kilo and a half. Hesitantly I took it looking uneasily at these men. “Don’t be afraid. Where you’re going, there are a lot of people.” A black car was waiting for me at the curb. I was escorted by a captain and another policeman in civvies. The car drove to the railroad station. A train was leaving for Moscow. It wasn’t hard to guess what “upstairs” meant. I was directed to a sleeping car with soft berths. Two other passengers were in the compartment. A woman came in and made up the bed. The officer told me to lie down. Another passenger came in and complained that I was in his berth. My guard whispered a few words into his ear and he left without saying another word.

The train left Odessa, and a page of life that I had loved was turned; in spite of everything, I had fond memories of my stay there.

MOSCOW

It was the eve of May 1st. For the Russians, such a holiday has to be “welcomed,” and this is inconceivable without vodka. On a train, this could be found only in the restaurant car. My captain was torn between his duty as a guard and his rights as a good Soviet patriot. Fortunately he

found a way to prevent his prisoner's escape and still allow him to celebrate. "Take off your pants and pass them to me. Without them you can't go far." He took them, stuffed them into his briefcase and left for the restaurant.

When he returned, he made me eat. He cut a piece of the prison bread and a slice of bacon from the rectory and gave them to me. He refused to let me use his knife.

On the first day of the trip, he did not let me get up. The next day, however, he said he thought I was a sensible man and handed back my trousers. I now could sit on the bunk and gaze out at the uniformly monotonous and snowy Steppes.

The train stopped fairly often, but the first station I can remember was Kursk. There and a bit further on, at Orel, traces of the war were numerous and terrible. According to one of the passengers, wonderful progress had been made in repairing the damage. Between these two stations, the train stopped at a little station on the edge of the forest. The peasants walking along the platform wore poor clothes. That did not surprise me. But it was their boots that fascinated me. As far as I could make out, they were just pieces of bark, stuffed with rags that wrapped around their legs up to the knees. The bark itself was tied by thongs or string. My guard explained to me that this was the local footwear. Later I found out that it was not so local. Such boots were worn throughout the region.

I was also curious about the mobile canteens in the stations. The women in charge were doing a brisk business with the passengers, especially with their home-distilled vodka called *Samogon*.

We arrived in Moscow on the morning of May 3rd. I must have cut a very sorry figure as we pushed our way through the crowd. I had five days' growth of beard, and my luggage was just a sheet, with the four corners knotted together, holding the few clothes I had with me.

The first thing that caught my eye in the station was an immense map of the battlefronts, showing the day-by-day progress of the armies. Since my arrest I had heard nothing of the war. Now I learned that Berlin had fallen. I also noticed a colossal statue of Lenin in the concourse.

We tried to leave the station by a side exit, but the guard stopped us. At a word from my escort, he let us through. We walked to a three-story building to the left of the square and I was put in a room on the top floor. After about an hour, my escort returned and we again went down to the street where a closed van, the infamous black paddy-wagon that I heard about in Odessa, awaited us. In the door was an opening about the size of my fist, cartel and through it I was allowed to have my first view of Moscow as we drove down its streets. At first I saw nothing special; just people, busses, trucks, and a few cars. Suddenly we turned Into Red Square and I had a glimpse of the wonders so often shown in photographs. I stared at the great red and gold star on the tower of the Holy Savior, and suddenly we left the Square. A few hundred meters further on, we went through a gateway and an iron gate closed behind us. We had arrived at the notorious annex of the Ministry of the Interior of the USSR, the Lubyanka prison, its four flights of barred windows hidden in the rich, majestic facade of the Ministry.

WELCOME

The paddy-wagon stopped. I was led up a flight of steps and through a fine new oak door, held open by a woman soldier, into a large hall. All around it were dozens of doors to reception cells for the newcomers. One was opened for me and immediately the bolt was slammed home behind me. I was in a sort of closet about two feet square, strongly lighted from above. A good half hour passed, but I did not have time to be bored. I was not the only one locked up, and it was interesting to note the different reactions of the prisoners in their "mousetraps." Some banged

on the door and screamed. Periodically the women on duty would open a cell and demand the reason for the noise. One of them impatiently slammed a door shut and said: "He's completely crazy!" She was referring to my neighbor who was weeping and begging to be released. From the quaver in his voice he seemed to be an old man, who spoke with a Leningrad accent.

In another cell was a young Rumanian who seemed to know only one Russian word "Tovarich" (Comrade). "Tovarich, Tovarich, I speak French. Give me a French Tovarich. A French interpreter, Tovarich." it was interesting but pathetic. Around me was a drama of broken lives, the anguish of souls that had been crushed. What a story those cells could tell...and I spent only a half hour in them.

NEXT TO GODLINESS

The door opened suddenly and I was taken away for a bath. When I came out of the shower, I was dismayed that my clothes had been taken away. The guard gave me some prison underwear, made me put on a pair of trousers that reached only to my calf, and a jacket that fit just about as well. My crowning glory was an ill-fitting, faded cloth cap which perched on only the top of my head. When I looked at myself in that outfit, I began to be depressed. How long would they leave me in that ridiculous get-up? There was no mirror, but as I was crossing the courtyard I had a glimpse of myself reflected in the window panes. I was deeply humiliated. Later on, when I had undergone my period of "re-education," I often laughed at my initial sensitiveness.



Next I was in a cell just slightly larger than the first one. It had a chair and a small board on the wall, that served as a table. And surprise! I saw my clothes, still warm from the disinfecting process. I lost no time getting out of the horrible prison garb. Then followed another pleasant surprise: a full plate of hot soup. Neither before nor after have I ever tasted anything so delicious. Perhaps because it was now Thursday and I had had only dry bread since the preceding Saturday.

I JOIN THE "CLUB"

After my "banquet?" I had to go to the photographer. No "guest" enters this place without leaving a souvenir of himself, front and profile^ with a little number in the corner. Finally, to complete the admission protocol, the newcomer is invited to a marble slab upon which ink has been rolled. He is fingerprinted and after that it is impossible for him to get lost.

When all this had been done, the door of the prison itself was opened to me. Here the mystery of initiation was more intimate. Accompanied by a giant of a man with jutting jaw and immense hands, I

went into a booth where again I had to strip. The giant picked up my clothes and started to examine them, stitch by stitch, holding them up to the light to make sure that nothing had been concealed in them. He took my shoes and pierced them inch by inch, asking whether I had concealed a needle or some scrap of paper. "Why don't you admit it right now! If we later find out that you have tricked us, it will be worse for you."

Now a woman in a white blouse entered and slipped something into my guard's pocket. I suspected that it was a pair of handcuffs. The man said nothing, kept inspecting, and the woman went out. Now and then he would suddenly glance at me, afraid that I might be palming something. The slightest sound alerted him. As he moved, the handcuffs in his pocket jangled, and he turned to me. "What's that noise you're making?" I smiled. "Maybe it's what she slipped into your pocket." He said nothing, and went back to his task.

Once he had finished, the woman returned. She searched my hair, inspected my mouth, tried my teeth to see if they were not false. Dentures are always confiscated. She forced me to take positions so that every recess of my body could be examined. Only then could I put my clothes back on. I was brought up to the third floor where I was locked in a small, windowless cell lighted by a strong bulb. An Iron cot, a stool, a small wooden table, and of course the special apparatus I had noticed in Odessa. The walls were green; the floor was waxed, and the door had a peephole which was often opened from outside.

Alone and tranquil now, I could reflect upon my situation. There was nothing sparkling about it, but so far it had not been tragic. Time would tell. There was no use worrying about it. The essential thing was to keep my balance, my composure, and my serenity of mind. I had to control all my emotional reactions. I had to rise above all contingencies.

As years passed, I realized how profitable had been these initial moments of reflection and resolution. There were moments when I had

to struggle against events, against my surroundings, even against myself. But I clung desperately to these principles. They saved my sanity.

I FIND COMPANIONS

My cell was three steps wide and five steps long. I walked back and forth long enough to marshal my thoughts. Then I decided I needed a rest. Naturally I went over to my bed and stretched out. I didn't stay long. After a couple of minutes the door was flung open and a guard strode in. "Who gave you permission to lie down?" he screamed. "We'll put you in the punishment cell. You can't go to bed here until you're told. Now go to bed."

I explained to him that I was a newcomer and did not yet know all the rules. He scowled, turned to go, and snarled "Pay attention." I was left alone for two days. The various comings and goings in the corridor were beginning to replace my confiscated watch. It was my first adjustment to the rhythm of prison life.

On the third day a guard entered and told me what I had heard a week earlier in Odessa, "Take all your belongings." My journey was shorter this time, just to the end of the corridor. The soldier opened a door on the right and ordered me to go in. I thought he was bringing me to some kind of office. But the door slammed behind me. Bewildered, I stood there with my bundle in my hands. Three men were staring at me. The metallic clang of the apparatus brought me back to reality. I was the fourth prisoner in the room.

Immediately questions came at me from every side; all three were speaking at once. "Who are you?" "Where do you come from?" "When were you arrested?" "Have you been tried?" "What's your nationality?" "Do you have any tobacco?" "Why were you arrested?" "Do you know where you are?"

When I told them that I was French, they asked me a question that I was to hear many times “How did you get involved in this kind of situation?” When I told them that I was a priest, one of them, tall, skinny, and sad-faced said to me “I am a priest too. I am a Pravoslav and was pastor of the Russian Orthodox Cathedral in Riga. They arrested me on the steps of the church and brought me here. I have a family beck there and they don’t know what has happened to me.”

By now the ice was broken and introductions continued. The second man, who at one time must have been very fat, had a jovial but commanding appearance. He had been a colonel in the Estonian Army and a government minister. He said “I was arrested just as I was leaving with my family for Sweden.” The third man was sitting, elbows on the table, his chin in clenched fists. He slowly turned to me. “I am a Bolshevik! What are you doing in Russia? Did you think you’d be happier here than in France? Well, now you know! Do you realize that you’re in the Lubyanka? You get out of here only to be shot or sent to the camps! Maybe you didn’t do anything. But once they get their paws on you, you will never get away. They’ll find enough pretexts to hang you. You wanted to know how we live here! That’s enough to mark you as a spy. In this country we have a man who is the Sun, the Father, and the Master (He went through the motions of twirling his mustache). We have heavy industry and tractors galore; but if you want to find something practical, like a saucepan or a needle...you find prisons and camps easier.

“I was a Party member. But I saw all these things and I turned in my card. That’s why they shoved me in here. Before that I was a Professor of chemistry here in Moscow.”

This diatribe, which I swear is authentic, left me dazed. I took out my tobacco pouch, and all four of us began to smoke, it was the last of my tiny supply from Odessa. My good German cigars and American

cigarettes must have fallen accidentally into the pocket of Kuznietzov when he searched my rectory.

LIFE IN THE LUBYANKA

We sat smoking, and the conversation became somewhat calmer. Naturally, it was mostly about life in the prison, and all this was very new to me. Some details were terrible, others were frankly comical or ridiculous. My companion seemed eager to tell me what I would soon experience.

“You know these soldiers who roam around us, constantly peering through the peephole. In prison slang we call them ‘weathercocks.’ The other day, the guy in the next cell, a stranger, called out ‘*Gospodin vertukai*’ (Mr. Weathercock) when he wanted something. You can imagine what effect that had!

“All the important prisoners are kept on the floor above us. The cell just above ours was that of Bukharin. Now Marshal Antonescu is up there.

“Did you notice the thick carpet in the corridor? You’d think we were in a first-class hotel. But it’s only to deaden the noise that goes on there. In 1918 these corridors were covered with blood, not carpets!

“They feed us three times a day, but you’ll be able to fill yourself only once.

“When you go for interrogation, that bastard will keep you all night, then here you won’t be able to sleep or lie down. If you close your eyes, even sitting down, you risk the punishment cell.” That I already knew.

Our conversation was interrupted by two guards who brought in for me an iron cot, a mattress, some sheets and blankets. Then they doled out the soup.

I always found something amusing and something sad with the distribution of food at the Lubyanka. In the morning, the door would

open to reveal a stately chef, garbed immaculately, with a tall white hat, holding in his right hand a metal tray. He would set it on the table and solemnly take from it four pieces of bread, each weighing 450 grams, 8 small pieces of sugar, a pot of hot water (by tradition called *Tchai*, tea). That was all. Then began the finest exercise of distributive justice one could ever imagine. One of us would turn his back while another, watched carefully by the other two, put his finger on each piece in turn. "Whose?" he would ask. The man with his back turned would call out each name in turn. It was the same for the sugar. Each man's share was decided by lot.

At noon we had the same solemn presentation, except that we didn't draw lots. Everyone got about 750 grams of soup. But it was not as good as the one I had received during my first day. It smelled good and must have been made from good fish, but the fish had been taken out before we were served. The only thing swimming in this soup was a few shreds of cabbage. It was considered a great event if a small piece of potato miraculously strayed on to a plate. After the soup, each one got 100 or 150 grams of *kacha*; they even changed our plates for this.

Kacha is a Russian national dish. It is a kind of oatmeal gruel. In prison, its preparation was simple and austere. There was never a gram of fat in it. It was just a tasteless, watery stew of hulled barley, ground corn, millet, or more often than not plain sorghum.

In the evening, with the same pomp, we were given about 100 grams of the *kacha* left over from noon. This was my unvarying diet from May 3 to October 24, 1954. We could have dispensed with the elegance (*kulturny*, how the Russians loved that word), if we had received more to eat. But it would be ungracious of me to complain, for, as the old proverb says "The manner of giving is worth more than the gift."

That night I learned more about prison. I had gone to bed at the regulation time of 9:00 P.M., with my head just beneath the powerful

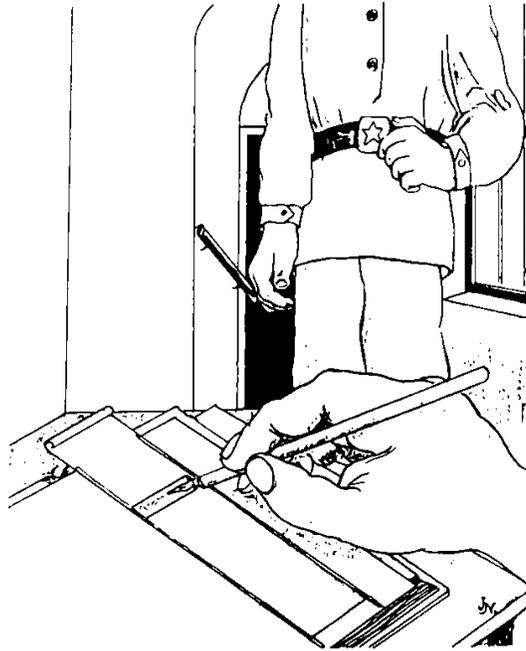
light, as in Odessa. Soon I had the impression that my body was a battlefield, with warring troops coming from every direction. They were bedbugs.

Still, I managed to rest, but the guard soon came in. “You must sleep with your arms outside the bedcovers.” This happened four times during the night.

TELL ME YOUR CRIMES

Five days later, the NKVD remembered my existence. It happened to be May 8, and the war was ending in Europe. But I did not know it at the time. A soldier came in, looking at a small paper in his hand. “Which one of you has a surname beginning with N?” I said that I did. He checked his paper and told me “Be ready in five minutes. You’re to appear for interrogation.”

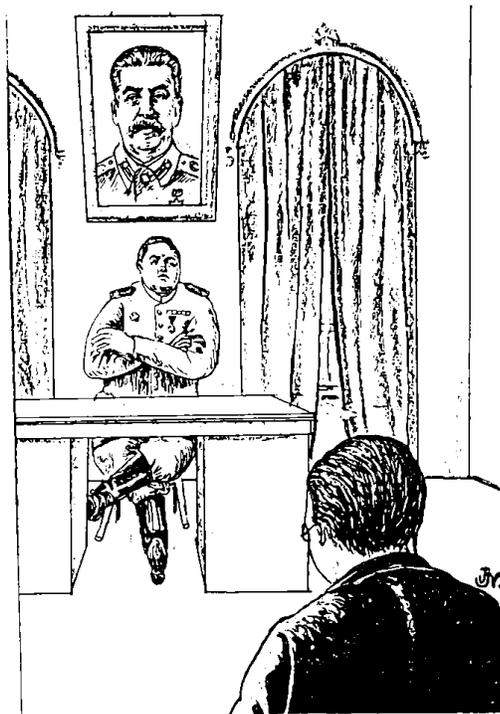
He came back for me. In the corridor I was searched and then was given my glasses that had been confiscated when I was arrested. I was told to put my hands behind my back. A soldier held me by the arm and we took the elevator.



First I was taken to the “Room of the Iron Book” through which all prisoners summoned to the Ministry of the Interior must pass. In this low-ceilinged room, every entry or departure of a prisoner must be registered, with the time. To preserve secrecy, the page was covered with a piece of iron, with just a narrow slit left open for the signature. The

judges had their offices on the seventh floor, so we climbed a magnificent staircase and walked down seemingly endless corridors that met at right angles. As we walked, I noticed my guard kept clicking his tongue in a peculiar way. Later I learned that all guards escorting prisoners did this, to give warning of their approach. This was to prevent prisoners from knowing the identity of other inmates. If two prisoners might meet, one was quickly stuck into one of the isolation booths that lined the corridors. Then he continued on his way, his guard still clicking away. During his stay in the Lubyanka, a prisoner sees only his cellmates.

At last we came to a stop before a door. The guard went in to report. I was brought in at once, into a large room, with green velour drapes at the windows. At a table sat a stout man in the uniform of a colonel. He signed me to take a seat near the door, some distance away from him. For a long time he just stared at me. Then, articulating each word very distinctly, he said, "Now tell me all your crimes."



He must have thought that this kind of frontal attack would serve him well, but it did not get him far. I told him I had committed no crimes. He tried again and there were a few more exchanges in the same vein. Finally he asked some routine questions about my name, life story, etc., and rang a bell. We went through the same routine in reverse: signing the Iron Book, search, confiscation of my glasses. When I reached my cell, my companions were curious about my interrogator. It seems that I had been examined by the Section Chief. Anyway, I was not questioned again for two weeks.

The following night we heard an unusual commotion in the street, just outside the prison walls: the rumble of tanks and trucks. The uproar lasted until morning and began again with cheering and the sound of bands. It was some kind of parade in Red Square and it meant that the war had ended. When the guards came to check on us, we questioned them. But no one would give us any news. I suppose they considered it none of our business. In any case, being enemies of the People, what right did we have to share in victory celebrations. That night, despite orders to stay away from the window, we did get a glimpse of a wonderful fireworks display, launched, no doubt, from the Kremlin.

LIFE GOES ON

Then we fell back into the monotonous routine of prison days. In the mornings there was the formal procession to the latrines. If there was a sufficient supply of paper, the guards would stand at the door and delicately offer each of us a small piece for personal use. "*Kulturny*." From it, there was no escape. In spite of the strict surveillance, this spot was our post office. Notes were hidden there, picked up, and answered. The little items nourished our conversation.

After breakfast came the visit of the medical corps. Then the administrative commission arrived to see if we had any complaints.

Sometime during the morning we were allowed a half-hour of exercise, but this was optional. My cellmates and I usually took advantage of the break. We would be taken by elevator to the flat roof of the Ministry building. A parapet six feet tall blocked our view, but at least we could hear the noise and bustle in the street and in the Square. We could enjoy the carillon of the Holy Savior Tower, which was quite near and sounded every quarter hour.

Sometimes one or another of my companions received a package from a relative. These were shared fraternally, and no one ever mentioned that I never had anything to share. We generally began with *papirossi* (cigarettes). At first we smoked normally. Russian cigarettes had a long cardboard tube, rather like a long filter tip without the filter. We would smoke the tobacco right down to the cardboard. Then we would gently peel back the outer layer from the cardboard, so as to form another tube. This we would fill from our little supply of tobacco, tamping it down with the end of a match. We were thus able to get two smokes from the same piece of paper. This we would do when the guard forgot the morning ration of paper.

Once a prisoner had been tried, he was taken from the cell and never returned. His place was quickly filled by a newcomer. One of them had himself, at one time, been a Civil Judge. He was also a fine musician and specialized in the works of Liszt. According to him, he had been arrested for bringing discredit upon the State organization on the occasion of a State visit by General De Gaulle. He had told the following story: De Gaulle had been given a fine room in a large hotel. Everything in Russia is under the administration of one ministry or the other. When De Gaulle wanted to take a nap, he discovered that the sheets had been starched. He had refused to sleep in the bed and instead had used a divan. It is for General De Gaulle to say whether this little story is true or not. But for having passed it on, our friend had been thrown into prison.

FRIEND MIKHAILOVICH

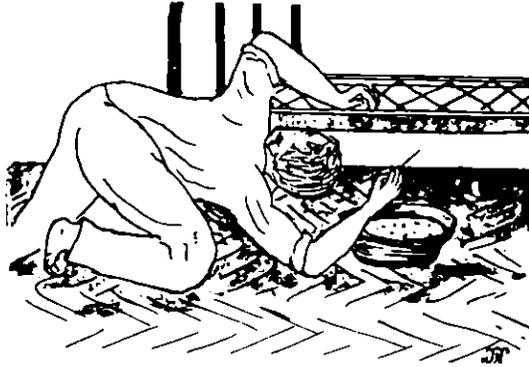
One cellmate whom I will never forget is Ivan Mikhailovich. The son of a lighthouse keeper on the Baltic coast, he was very intelligent, and, by hard work and determination, had become a mining engineer. An important member of the Russian Socialist Party, he had had all kinds of adventures in the civil war that followed the Revolution. He was Minister of Finance in the Saratov government, he had joined the Czechoslovakian Legion, had gone right across Siberia into Japan, through America, and back to Prague. For twenty years, he had been in charge of Relief Organizations for his compatriot refugees. He spoke excellent French and was a most interesting conversationalist. Each day he gave me Russian lessons and taught me to read and appreciate the classical Russian authors.

I should explain that every Tuesday we could borrow books from the prison library, which was fairly extensive. Rumor had it that the librarian was none other than the famous Jew, Caplan, who had organized the plot against Lenin. The plot failed but, at the request of Lenin himself, Caplan was not executed. He was sentenced to life imprisonment “so that he might have the opportunity to see the triumph of the man he had wished to kill.”

Ivan Mikhailovich would keep us spellbound for hours with his conversations which were really friendly lectures in which he placed at our disposal his experience of life and his scientific knowledge. In spite of his sixty-four years, he had an optimism that was indestructible.

I cannot mention everyone who passed through my cell between May and October. Not everyone had the outstanding personality of Mikhailovich, but in general they were good companions. Occasionally there was need for teamwork. Sometimes we had to clean house, wax the floors, get rid of the bedbugs. To do this, one of us would take a stick

and dig them out of their hiding places and knock them into bowls of water held by the other fellows. At times, our tally would be more than fifty per bed. For a few days we could sleep with less discomfort.



Once a week a barber would come to shave us. He used a pair of clippers, not a razor. The authorities were always afraid that someone would commit suicide. It was this reason too that we were forbidden to sleep with our arms under the blankets. A determined man, with a splinter of glass or metal, could easily open a vein. Needle and thread were available if we wished to make small repairs to our clothing; but while we were using them, the guard never left the peephole. If more extensive work was needed, he took the prisoner to another cell.

250 HOURS OF INTERROGATION

Over a period of four months, I was questioned 60 times, for a total of 250 hours. The sessions were at irregular intervals. Sometimes I was called every day, or more correctly, every night, for an entire week. But I could never relax.

Normally, these sessions had a definite pattern. At 9:00 P.M. we were ordered to bed. Then just as we were falling asleep, the guard would come in with his slip of paper. "The man whose surname begins with X or N!" it was so hard to get up. What a sigh of relief I gave when I found that he had not come for me. Prison life makes a man very self-centered.

On the first five occasions, I was questioned by the man who had sent for me originally. Sometimes he was alone; sometimes he had other officers with him. I remember one of them picking up my passport and looking with amusement from my photo to me, with my close-cropped hair and a week's growth of beard. Unnecessarily he said, "You don't look much like this anymore."

They asked me whether I wanted an interpreter, but I refused, saying that I knew enough Russian to follow the proceedings. It is true that I still expressed myself incorrectly, but I could understand perfectly what was said to me. In fact, during the fifth session, I picked up this rather interesting exchange among themselves: "He is not what we thought he was." -"True, but we don't often make mistakes." -"Well, what are we doing now?" -"Don't worry, we'll find some way." And from that moment on, I knew that my fate was sealed.

A few undisturbed nights followed and then I was brought before Major Ivan Ivanovich Gorbunov. This was significant. I had heard that he was a specialist in the trials of clerics and was usually entrusted with the winding-up of a case. He was a sandy-haired man, calm and patient, quite an artist in his own field. He knew just the moment to slip in the casual, loaded question, or when to disarm his victim by offering a cigarette.

With him I had to start again the routine procedure: tell my life story, giving the most insignificant little details, explaining the meaning and purpose of all sorts of papers and objects taken from my room when I was arrested, and which he would take out of his desk drawer.

He had only one objective: to convict me of espionage and anti-Soviet propaganda. Of course, that meant that I had to admit the charges. If my answers did not suit him, he would try again in another way, in order to reach his goal. Only once did he lose patience, and even then he

soon recovered his poise. On that particular day, he had tried every trick to get me to contradict myself.

After two hours of these apparently calm, but really tense, exchanges, he drew up first one, then a second, and a third statement from notes he had taken. I was to read it and sign. He then tore up the others. Meanwhile, he started his questioning again, but more briefly, this time. Often, as he was dismissing me, he gave me a theme to ponder, which we would discuss at our next meeting. It was usually two or three o'clock in the morning before I got back to my room. I would have to be up at 6 a.m., just like the others.

Lack of sleep and the meager diet gradually wore me down. There were times when I could barely keep my eyes open before the interrogator. I told him that I could not take much more. So, for several days, I was summoned in the afternoon.

Gorbunov had arranged his questions under various headings, the importance of which, in his eyes, grew in crescendo. From time to time, he would ask something completely irrelevant to what we were discussing. My reluctance to answer such questions never discouraged him. He just returned to his prior line of interrogation and tried to slip in the same questions later. It soon became obvious to me that I had little to gain except time.

Occasionally, I played a little game that gave both of us some time, and me, some malicious satisfaction. I would pretend that I did not understand the question. He would repeat it in simpler form. This too would be beyond me; so I would force him to ask for a third time. I was usually satisfied with this, and I must confess that I never succeeded in exhausting his patience. I could never have tried this with the interrogator in the next room, who could be heard cursing and beating his hapless victim.

There was a basic dishonesty in Gorbunov's method, which annoyed me. He was always trying to change the facts and distort the truth in order to fit his case. Here is one example: The permit that I had obtained in order to go from Rumania to Odessa had been found among my papers. In this document, my name was given as "Father Joan Nicolas." The Russians had registered it as "Jean Nicolía." According to Gorbunov, the only way to pronounce it was "JeANN NicoLASS." I disagreed with him but he could not see it. "All right," he said, "so your name is NicOla." "Pardon me," I replied, "the accent is on the last syllable." "Then you must pronounce it NicolíA," he said. "It is not NicolíA. It is NicolA." "But it is impossible to say that in Russian," retorted Gorbunov. "Just as it is impossible for the Rumanians not to say Joan instead of Jean," I told him.

I don't remember how long we spent on such nonsense, but when he drew up his statement I was suspicious and refused to sign it. After my trial, I got a look at my dossier and saw Gorbunov's conclusion from the above exchange: "This suspected spy changed his name according to the country that he happens to be in." Therefore they had reason to suspect me.

Sometimes he was ahead of schedule, and would start a conversation about religion or philosophy. "If it were left to me," he would say, "I would suppress the bit of religion which is still tolerated in the USSR. Why do people go to church? Simply because it's like a theatre. They have singing, fine costumes, and a beautiful setting. We must replace all this with real culture and nobody will ever think of going to church."

Or he would say: "How can you say that you have studied philosophy when you do not follow Marx or Engels? Theirs is the only real philosophy, upon which all the principles of the Soviet Union are based." When I told him that all the high school teachers at Beius, in Rumania, were priests, he commented dryly, "That must have been

really great!” I responded that our students succeeded very well in the universities. I can still see him springing up from his chair, white with rage, hammering on his desk, and screaming “What are you trying to say?” He barely avoided calling me a liar.

There was nothing original in his objections to religion and to the Bible, or in his diatribes against retrograde obscurantism among believers. They were found in all the popular scientific magazines and in all the textbooks. Were they convinced or were they just trying to protect themselves from eventual suspicion?

O.S.S.O.: SPECIAL AFFAIRS

Strict logic, as understood in the West, is certainly not one of the characteristics of the Slavic mind. I should not have been astonished when my interrogator, having expounded his principles, treated me pleasantly. On several occasions, he lent me a book to keep me occupied while he drew up his statement. “Read this. I know it interests you.” it was the New Testament! Thanks to him, I could strengthen myself spiritually while he worked on the documents that would condemn me.

This reminded me of a story from the Czarist days, which I was assured, was authentic. It shows how, for the Russians, the extremes touched. An old peasant and his wife were driving an ox cart along a muddy road. The cart became stuck. The old couple were too feeble to move it. A cavalry troop, headed for a parade in a nearby town, saw their predicament. They dismounted and, with much pulling and pushing, extricated the cart. Then they went their way, amid the thanks of the old couple. They didn’t go far. They discovered that their dress uniforms were muddied. They turned back their horses, retraced their steps, and shot the old couple they had just helped.

Often, when I was being questioned, my interrogator's superiors came in. Sometimes they questioned me, but as a rule they simply sat and listened in silence. They seemed to know all about my case.

Later I learned they were members of the notorious O.S.S.O., (Commission for Special Affairs) which had been created for the purpose of condemning a person, without trial or appeal, for a period that could be extended indefinitely. On the other hand, rarely, they could free a man for no obvious reason. Generally, this Commission took care of people who would be acquitted before the trial, because of lack of evidence or witnesses. Sometimes the interests of the Party and of the State demanded energetic solutions. The O.S.S.O. existed to subvert and, if necessary, replace justice. Stalin himself declared that it was better to punish 500 innocents rather than risk the loss of one guilty person.

FLOWERS

One summer day, while I was being questioned, Gorbunov had to leave for half an hour. He brought me to an office on the floor below, where two secretaries were busily typing. On their desk was a large vase filled with lilacs. I was badly upset. These flowers were the only ones I had seen during 1945. They reminded me of freedom. They contrasted with the dullness and sadness of my life as a prisoner. For the first time since I had come to the Lubyanka, I felt really depressed.



A LAST INTERROGATION

At one time I felt that my case had reached a stalemate. Gorbunov had failed to find, in my words or my actions, any serious basis for condemnation. Yet it was his duty to obtain a conviction. He did not want to seem Incompetent to his superiors. Already the O.S.S.O. people were impatient. One day, my interrogator, abandoning his efforts to discover what I had said or done prior to my arrest, began to ask my opinions about a whole variety of subjects. "Pardon me," I objected, "what I think about these matters is wholly irrelevant. You are conducting this inquiry to discover whether I have taken part in any movement against your Party or your country. My attitude has been blameless within the limits of the freedom which I was allowed. It is your business to find facts or words that can be held against me. But my thoughts are my own."

Gorbunov did not agree. He continued to ask the most extraordinary questions. For Instance, "What do you think of the Polish government set up in England?" -"I don't think about it at all." -"It isn't possible that you have no opinion on this matter. Is it a legitimate government or not?"

Gorbunov was doing his utmost and his moment of triumph could not be far away. During the next two or three meetings, he was unusually friendly. He even gave me cigarettes to smoke in my cell. Then, one night, I discovered that he now had a new tactic. "You are," he began, "a priest of the Catholic Church, and you belong to a religious Order. You came here as an uninvited, even undesirable, visitor, supposedly to minister to the Catholics of Odessa. They had no need of you, because in this country everyone has freedom of conscience and can worship as he chooses. You say that you did not come to Odessa on your own initiative, but at the request of your superiors. Who are these superiors? They are foreigners. What interest can they possibly have in our Soviet Union? Oh! they want to maintain and develop religion in the USSR. So

they sent you to propagandize directly against the materialistic principles that govern the Soviet Union.

“Now I understand that your superiors are rather like officers whom you must obey. But who are their officers? I will tell you: they are the bishops and above all the Pope of Rome. We know that very well.”

“That’s true, and I can tell you that I would not be what I am If I thought otherwise than they. Catholics worldwide are more than double the population of the Soviet Union. All of them obey the Pope...not only priests but laymen as well.”

This was Gorbunov’s great moment. “Surely you realize that the Pope is the most deadly enemy of the Soviet Union?” he purred. “He has condemned us in his letters. Along with all the capitalist reactionaries, and with all the power of money, he is conducting a violent campaign against Communism. The Vatican has its schools for spies who are landed here by parachute. The Vatican, with its priests and monks, exploits the people, keeping them in ignorance and illusion. You say you obey the Pope. You come here and pretend that you are not a spy? Come on! Let’s be logical and reasonable.”

I felt instinctively that this was the end. For Gorbunov this was the only possible conclusion. His argument was the only one possible for a trained member of the Secret Police, and he could foresee the end of his inquiry.

FACE TO FACE

Two incidents worthy of note broke the monotony of my last days in the Lubyanka. First, I appeared, without my knowing it, before the O.S.S.O. I was brought down to an office on the second floor, where three men in civilian clothes were standing. Two of them I recognized as having been present at some of my interrogations. They asked me only three harmless questions, a pure formality. There was silence. Then,

suddenly, one of them asked me “What would you say If we gave you fifteen years?” I had to laugh. Considering all the evidence you produced at the inquiry, I doubt that even you could give me fifteen years.”

I don’t know if my answer changed their minds, but in any event I did not get fifteen years.

The second event was far more touching. I was told that I would be confronted with Father Leoni so that any discrepancy in the evidence could be ironed out. Thus did I discover that Father Leoni had also been arrested, brought to Moscow, and questioned, probably by the same Gorbunov.

In the same office, the next day, Father Leoni was brought in. He looked pale and thin. Undoubtedly he thought the same of me. At first we were not allowed to speak to each other. We could only smile... sadly. But Father managed to whisper one word “Absolution.” “What did he say?” asked the officer. “Nothing,” I answered. “I’ll tell you later.” - “Very well. I see that you know each other. You may shake hands.”

After that, he said that there were certain discrepancies in our statements that he wanted to correct. This was rapidly done. As we were about to leave, we asked him a favor. Would he allow us to absolve each other? Our future was very uncertain, and we might never meet another priest. “Very well,” he said, “permission is granted, on one condition. You must do it in Russian so that I can understand what you are saying.”

What a scene for a movie! In an Interrogation Room, on the seventh floor of the Ministry of the Interior, where undoubtedly



many other priests had preceded us, before an officer standing with folded arms beneath the portrait of the Little Father of the People, two priests knelt and asked from one another pardon and blessing. It is unnecessary to mention our feelings.

YOU WOULD IF YOU COULD

Several days passed before I was sent for again. Then came the moment when parts of my dossier were shown to me. All that remained was for me to appear before the Prosecutor. He had a secretary who kept minutes of the meeting. She began to type: "The suspect... Your name?" "Correct that," snapped the Prosecutor, "He is now the Accused."

Turning to me, he said "I have been studying your dossier. It would seem that you have done no spying. That does not mean that you are not a spy. Perhaps you never had the opportunity. It is our duty to make sure that you have no opportunity for some time to come, maybe for a year or two at least."

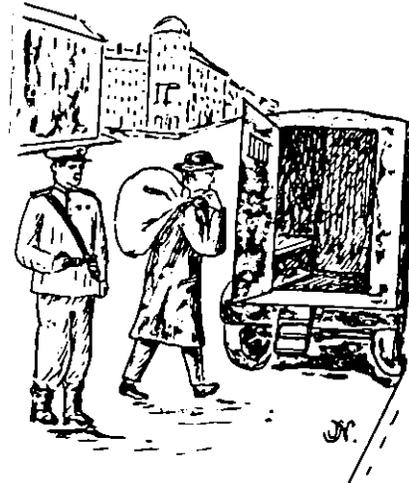
Oh Justice! full of foresight and worthy of admiration!

CHAPTER SEVEN

FROM PRISON TO PRISON

It was clear that there was nothing further for me in the Lubyanka. Having gone from suspect to accused, I no longer deserved the relative comfort of a State prison. Soon the situation changed.

Around October 24, I was once again ordered to gather my belongings. These had increased considerably since my arrival because I had been allowed to receive two packages of clothes and some canned goods sent from Odessa. I had fashioned a sort of bag from



an old sheet and into this I stuffed my wardrobe. After the usual search, I was loaded into a paddy-wagon. A few moments later, I heard them putting someone else on the other side of the steel partition. The man was certainly not a Russian; and from the sound of his voice, he must have been quite old.

“Where are you taking me?” he quavered.

“You are going home,” he was told.

“Home? To Bucharest?”

The poor man. I realized then that I was not the only one to harbor illusions. Secretly, I still had some hope of being released.

After a good half-hour's drive, we were taken from the gloom of our iron box and deposited in another prison. Unlike the Lubyanka, this one did not try to hide behind the elegant facade of a Ministry. We were in the Butyrkaia prison, which dated back to the days of Catherine the Great.

The reception hall was more proletarian than that of the Lubyanka, but the rigmarole was the same: women guards, narrow but brightly lighted booths along the corridor, the long wait, the compulsory bath. The bath attendant was also a prisoner, and her zeal was minimal. She rapped on my door and asked "Do you have lice?" When I told her no, she wandered away muttering "OK, then I won't have to disinfect your clothes."

After registration I was brought into another room holding about twenty-four beds, which were all raised up against the wall. Eighteen men were in there, and they gathered around me with the usual questions, which again ended with the request "Do you have any tobacco?" My fluency in Russian was still poor, but in prison I learned the shades of meaning of *kurit* (to smoke) with its prefixes, which varied to: to give a light, to share someone's cigarette butt, to start smoking, to stop work in order to smoke, to smoke until the very end, to sneak a smoke.

I also learned the peculiarities of the house. Food is always the uppermost topic in their minds. Here it was more plentiful than in the Lubyanka. Prisoners exercised in an airy yard, from which could be seen the towers where men condemned to death were kept. The glass panes on the bathroom walls were an unofficial bulletin board. Prisoners would write the length of their sentence. Guards made periodic attempts to clean the walls but right away new messages appeared.

MY ROOMMATES

I soon discovered three very distinct groups in the room: foreigners, Russian intelligentsia, and the others. The atmosphere was one of mistrust; every one suspected everyone else of being a police agent. There was a constant turnover in personnel, every day bringing some change in the composition of the group. Each prisoner stayed an average of two or three weeks. Of course there were exceptions. For instance, an ex-colonel of the Red Army had been there for two years, and once a month was called for interrogation. Unlike the others, he never spoke of the reason for his incarceration. He had an air of authority, and that is probably why he was the room Captain, who presided at the distribution of food. His conversation was interesting. He liked to talk about China, where he had traveled widely for eight years.

There was also a Bulgarian, a former student of the Assumptionist College in Plovdiv. He was a very refined young man who spoke French fluently. He often spoke of his country, his plans, and especially of his family. He had been arrested and was in a basement cell in Sofia when his little daughter was born. His sister-in-law had walked down the street outside the prison and had managed to give him the news. Two days later he was sent to Russia without ever seeing his baby.

There was also an Austrian aviator who had dropped Axis agents into Russia by parachute. He claimed to have made a secret flight over the United States. He expected to be executed; as did a Russian ex-Army officer who told me that he had once been in prison with Leon Blum, a former French Minister, and with a Catholic bishop. I later discovered that this was Bishop Theas, of Lourdes.

I remember a Rumanian who spent his time learning economic recipes, in order, he said, "to make simple but nourishing meals when he reached the camps." This poor fellow lived in a dream world. When he left, according to his soap message in the bathroom, he had been sentenced to twenty years of forced labor.

Another roommate was a Russian actor. The reason for his arrest was at once childish and distressing, but it was always good for a laugh. In 1945, after a performance in Moscow, he was relaxing with a little spiritism in the form of table turning. Unfortunately he was not alone when he asked the table to tell him when Stalin would die. The table told him "1948." He was denounced and arrested. The table had fooled him by five years, as Stalin died only in 1953. But the actor's thirst for knowledge won him ten years for "a state of mind which showed his impatience to see the Fatherland in mourning."

Another man had formerly been employed in the concentration camps. He claimed to have been imprisoned for embezzling, but the general consensus was that he was a spy. Finally, there were two men from a collective farm. I was genuinely interested in learning about these celebrated institutions, but the men either refused to answer or else confined themselves to such generalities that they told me nothing.

BREAD

I can still remember the morning when the guard doled out a ration of bread that was far larger than our usual one. We thought it was an error. The next day, we learned that the ration had been increased from 450 to 600 grams. Whatever the ration, it was always shared with the same sense of fairness. The crusty end pieces were the most desirable, so they were taken out first and handed around as far as they would go. The unlucky fellows had to wait another day for their turn. The rest of the bread, which was not so well baked, was equitably shared, even to the tiny pieces that had been added in order to make up the weight. Some of us consumed the entire ration as soon as we got it. There were two reasons for this: fear of having our portion stolen, and the pleasure of feeling full at least once a day. The oatmeal soup, served at 10:00 A.M., noon, and 5:00 P.M. had to hold us until the next morning.

PRISONERS' JUSTICE

Regulations governing exercise were less stringent than at the Lubyanka, where men had to walk in line, about three paces apart, hands behind their backs, in silence. We were now allowed to walk in twos with our hands free and were able to converse in low tones. Those who did not wish to exercise would stay in their cells, but someone was always given the responsibility of seeing that nothing was stolen in the absence of the others. I always took a walk and considered this period the most pleasant of the entire day.

Another eagerly awaited event was the distribution of packages. This was heralded by the squeaking of the little pushcart that we nicknamed "the Joy-bringer." Traditionally, anyone receiving a package shared it, at least with his immediate neighbors. A man from the Baltic region received each week a package of bacon or pork. He never shared anything; he would wait until night to eat some of his treasure under cover of darkness and bed clothes. One day, while he was gone to the infirmary, all his provisions disappeared. When he returned, the room captain gave him a stiff lecture and threw in a few threats that were sufficient to prevent him from complaining to the guards.

Among themselves, the prisoners upheld and applied principles of justice which, although imperfect, were at least objective. One fellow who had stolen a half-ration of bread was so badly beaten that the guards had to remove him to another cell. It is noteworthy that they never tried to find or punish the attackers. These outbreaks of violence always distressed me, but I was to see worse things before I was finished with the camps.

TWO SURPRISES

There was a well-stocked library at the Butyraskaia that helped make three weeks pass quite quickly. During this time, I was twice called to the peephole to receive two official receipts for the articles confiscated in Odessa: my watch, my crucifix, and my rosary. Then, one day, I was told to gather my possessions. This could only mean that I was to learn my sentence. I hastily said goodbye to my roommates and took my place in a line of waiting men. It so happened that I was next to a very old man with a long white beard, who seemed only half-dressed.

“Who are you?” he whispered, “Are you Father Nicolas?”

“Yes. And who are you, and how do you know my name?”

“I am Father Y.”

“They have often questioned me about you. Surely they have asked you about me?”

“Yes. We can talk later. Have you any clothes to spare? Thieves on the train stole everything except my pants and shirt. My roommates lent me a sweater, but I had to return it before I left.”



I fumbled through my bundle and found an old sweater which I gave him. The poor Father was very happy. When we had all assembled, we had to go down to a hall, furnished with long tables, just like a custom shed. Our possessions were carefully inspected and we were led into another room. There, to my joy, I saw Fr. Leoni, whom I had not seen since that day at the Ministry.

ONE THOUSAND YEARS OF FREE LABOR

There were twenty-four of us waiting in that room. An officer appeared with a list. As his name was called, each man had to go into a

tiny office where he was given his sentence. As he emerged, he would announce the figure to the others. On it went: 10, 10, 10. The charges against us, for real or imaginary crimes, may have varied, but the sentences, for the most part, were identical. There were a few exceptions: three or four got only five years; one or two got only eight. But some others made up for it by getting fifteen or twenty years.

When I went into the office, an N.K.V.D. officer read me the decision of the O.S.S.O. "For espionage and anti-Soviet agitation, the criminal, in view of Article 58 of the Soviet Penal Code, paragraphs 6 and 10, is sentenced to spend eight years in a correctional labor camp, and this to date from April 19, 1945 until April 19, 1953." As the confiscation of my personal goods was not decreed, I was asked to name some person to take care of my affairs. I chose a member of the French colony in Odessa. Then I signed a form and returned to the waiting room. The other two priests received ten years for the same offence. Maybe the Jesuits were in greater disfavor than the Assumptionists.

All things considered, it must be admitted that the police and the prosecutors had worked hard to meet the norms imposed upon them. From our group of 85 people, the Soviet Union had just received a present of a thousand years of unpaid labor. Forests would be cut down, coal would be dug, railroads, tunnels, and houses would be constructed. And not a penny would be paid in wages. According to rumors, each prosecutor had to hand



out 700 years of labor each month. Thanks to them, the Party and the State could indulge in projects that would hasten the coming of “paradise on earth” at home and abroad. But at times, the road that leads there must skirt the very brink of Hell.

This disbursement of one thousand years having been made, we were taken to the baths, where a female barber cut off all our hair, which until this time we had been able to keep in reasonable condition. From now on we were convicts. During the bath each one wrote on the wall some sort of sign. I wrote “FR 8,” which meant French and an 8 year sentence. I felt gratified a few days later, when a former companion rejoined us and told me that my message had been received and understood.

That night we were marched out of the main building, through a gate, and across a courtyard to what had once been the prison church. It had now been divided into two floors. As we went in I noticed that the ground floor was being used for storage. To the right was a staircase which we mounted and found ourselves right under the central cupola. The altar had, of course, long been removed, and there was left just a large room with white-washed walls, pierced at intervals by padlocked doors. We had to report to an officer seated behind a table. Each of us had to fill in a form, giving family name, given name, birthdate, and the Article and points of the Penal Code under which we were sentenced. This formality I would often have to repeat during my term of incarceration.

We were formed into ranks and made to enter a room in which were at least 100 men. The noise, cursing, shoving were beyond description. The room was about



ten meters square, dark and smelly, and the injection of our group of 24 certainly did not help the situation. There were cots all along the wall, which was damp and stained. Apart from a narrow passage, the whole center of the room was occupied with planks, spread out to create platforms for sleeping.

Somehow I found a little vacant corner and was about to install myself when my neighbors made me open my bundle and give them presents. A heated debate followed and finally I decided to move elsewhere. By this time all available space had been occupied and I had to content myself with sitting, very precariously, on the very edge of a plank on which two other prisoners were already stretched out. I put my pack on my knees, laid my head upon it, and spent a restless night. The next day I discovered that there were some planks on the floor beneath the benches. The clearance was only about 15 inches, but I crawled in and stretched out my weary bones. Many of my companions had done the same thing, except for one poor old man who had not found a place. Rebuffed from all sides, he was reduced to sitting on the toilet seat. Of course he got no rest there, as he had to stand up every few minutes to let others use the facility. Absolutely worn out, the old man was transferred to the infirmary. There he refused all food, and died two days later.

The state of this room was absolutely disgusting. The floor was a spittoon for everybody, and a dormitory and dining room for all. Privileges were obtained and maintained by fist fights, and I was therefore excluded from them. At night we had to crawl into our sleeping spots like dogs in a kennel. In the morning we were likely to find ourselves damp because of the carelessness of the guy above, or because he was too lazy to climb over dozens of sleepers between him and the corner where our old friend used to sit.

We not only slept like dogs, we ate like them. Some forty of us had been issued no spoons, so we had to lap the food from our plates. The

Lubyanka had been a first-class hotel compared to this place. Not content with profaning the House of God, these fellows were profaning the dignity of man. I spent forty days in this place and it was the longest, hardest Lent of my life.

DARK DAYS

In the mornings, a soldier opened the door and we were led to the washroom, located just above what had once been the sanctuary of the church. What a madhouse! There were always ten candidates for each free toilet. Shouting, squabbling, brawling. The use of toilet paper by the “bourgeois” was particularly galling to the young Russians who felt that culture, here at least, should give way to haste. And at the washbasins we were lucky if there was enough water to let everyone wet the end of his nose. It was miraculous that under these conditions we were not devoured by vermin.

At mealtimes, the guard would ask for volunteers to carry the pots from the kitchen. He always got more than he needed. It was pitiful to see men huddling around the door as the time drew near. Those without spoons would borrow one from a neighbor. The privileged ones would go to the kitchen in Indian file, but returned two by two, carrying the huge pots, under the watchful eye of the guards. Even so, they often managed to snatch a quick spoonful, which often burnt their mouths. The more adept might get as many as four spoonfuls, and considered their exploits as great victories.

Under these conditions, the emergence of an aristocracy of racketeers was not surprising, and they dominated the others by brute force. It was they who chose the “chefs” who would dole out what was “theoretically” an equal amount into each of the 124 bowls. His impartiality seldom survived the test of time. To pacify the malcontents, the racketeers would appoint a replacement. This happened every two or

three days. We were fed twice a day: at noon we had soup and *kacha*, at night we had only soup. According to prison tradition, everything was boiled, and there was never a scrap of meat or fat. If anyone complained, he was asked if he thought he were on vacation.

Naturally we could have no books. The only distractions were exercise and conversation. The cell door was opened only to let out some prisoner who was being summoned to begin his journey to some camp. Sometimes sheets of notepaper were distributed. On them one could write an appeal, or write to some friend, begging for food. I don't know what became of such letters. I wrote to the French Embassy three times, but never received an answer.

INTRODUCING...

My comrades had nothing in common except their misfortune. One might distinguish two main categories: real criminals and political prisoners. There was little contact between the two groups. The former were exclusively Russian, and the most threatening among them was a gang that had somehow swindled from the State several thousand rubles. Almost every day, they received large packages of food from their cronies that the State had not yet arrested. They had round, rosy faces, and deep-set eyes, and they made no secret of their contempt for us.

We political prisoners were in the majority and formed quite a mosaic of race and nationality. Besides three priests (one French, one Italian, one Czech) there was a Czech journalist. He was always cheerful, but he was so thin and destitute that even the racketeers in Krasnaia Presna prison had taken pity on him and given him food.

There was a German clergyman, a former Protestant who had become a Pravoslav Orthodox priest. There were two Greeks and five Armenians who had been arrested in Rumania. Their crime had been "the aiding of Capitalist powers"; it seems they had given money to a

hospital for wounded soldiers in Bucharest. A poor Turk who lived near the Russian border had been seized from his home one night, by a commando raid across the frontier. The raid into Rumania had also yielded two hair-dressers, who, it seems, had talked too much. There was also the editor-in-chief of a large Bucharest dally newspaper. He had been summoned to the Prefecture of Police, on the pretext that an arrested man had named him as a defense witness. He was arrested on the spot.

There were also two Bulgarian officers, one of them a colonel, and a Pole who stubbornly refused to speak a single word of Russian. And certainly I am forgetting some. There were also Soviet citizens from all the corners of their vast territory: Muscovites, Byelorussians, Ukrainians, Georgians and Baits. Among them, for the first time, I heard the grim parody of the famous slogan "Workers of the World unite." Their version was, "Workers of the World are here united, in prison."

Naturally, I spent most of my time with the other priests. Many of our fellow-prisoners understood French, so we spoke in Rumanian if we had anything private to discuss. Another sincere friend was Vasily Appollosevich, a science professor in Moscow. He was a refined and very sensitive man, who at times was deeply depressed by his ten-year sentence. He was invariably my companion during our exercise period, and I did what I could to cheer him up.

I remember one other fellow, who used to bore us with his long stories about his former wealth, travels, and love affairs. He owned property in the Crimea, and had managed to get permission to live in the Russian zone near Dresden. One day he was arrested, brought back to "Mother Russia," and thrown into prison. He was convinced that a mistake had been made and that he would soon hear that his ten-year sentence would soon be quashed.

Other prisoners expected a general amnesty. They did not seem to understand that the reason for their arrest was mostly economic, not political: the State had to have a constant supply of cheap manual labor.

A PIECE OF BUTTER

Fr. Leoni and I became friendly with a Muscovite engineer who had been a prisoner for three years. At first he had been sent to the Arctic region, but had been recalled to Moscow, either to give further testimony or else for a revision of his trial. I forget which. He told us that in the Arctic he had received daily three cans of food: one of milk, one of meat or fish, and one of vegetables. We thought that was the general rule, but my experience has proved that we were wrong. This man must have held a very important position, not at all incompatible with his prisoner status. Or perhaps he had been in a very forward post, where as yet no regular prison group had been organized.

Just before Christmas, he received a food package. Knowing what this feast meant to Fr. Leoni and me, he was kind enough to give us a piece of butter, weighing about 20 grams. This was the first butter I had seen in eight months, and I heard a few murmurs of envy as I took a piece of bread and carefully spread it.

I took a bite. I swear that I will never forget the sensation that ran through me. My whole body shuddered violently; every part of my body seemingly rushed to my tongue, to dispute possession of the poor little morsel, melting away so rapidly. I was pleased but terrified.

A MIDNIGHT CONCERT

New Year's Day came and we were still there. But a bit of brightness had for a moment come into our lives. Among the prisoners was Nicholas Petchkovsky, first tenor at the Leningrad Opera. He had

been arrested for having tried to join his mother in Berlin, and for having sung for a German audience. He got ten years. He was very popular with the men. All day long, he would sit in the corner of the cell and sing whatever they requested: love songs. Russian folk-songs, operatic arias. All came alike to him, even though he had to sing in a subdued voice! He seemed to cast a spell over the whole room, especially with a particular selection from Beranger, which never failed to move his audience to tears.

With two other singers, he arranged a New Year's Eve concert. The concert began somewhat timidly, so as not to attract the attention of the guards. But little by little, restraint was thrown to the winds, and it was at the top of his voice that Petchkovsky sang "I curse my fate" from *Paqliacci*.

Amid the applause, the door opened and a group of soldiers entered the room, half-smiling, half-serious. For once they showed a glimmer of intelligence. They had been gathered outside the door, enjoying the singing. Because there were no officers present, they had let the concert continue, despite some rule forbidding noise or singing. Now they had to make some show of authority, and demanded that the singer step forward. There was no reply and, although they knew very well that it was Petchkovsky, they asked again. Finally, a young man stepped forward and said he was the culprit. The guards took him away, but in a few moments he was back, with a great grin on his face.

"What happened?" everyone wanted to know.

"Oh, nothing. They just asked me to sing the same piece again for them."

A great burst of laughter greeted the arrival of 1946.

AT LAST

On January 1st, Fr. Leoni and the other priest left. I was the last one left. The next day, both Vasily Appollosevich and I were told to gather our things. We did so with some apprehension. In spite of the disgust that we felt for our present situation, there was always present the possibility that we would reach lower depths. The immediate future proved us right. When we left our cell, we were brought back to Butyraskaia to be searched and given a bath. After that, we were taken to the reception hall and locked in the familiar little booths. There I decided to wear as many clothes as possible, to diminish the risk of having them stolen. I donned several sets of underwear and two pairs of pants. It was winter, but if I had known what was about to happen, I would gladly have given them to the first man I met.

When all was ready, thirty of us were herded into a waiting paddy-wagon. Because we were jammed together in the darkness, very soon arguments and squabbles arose, but luckily there was no room for blows.

After about an hour, we were unloaded near a railway line. I noticed that the N.K.V.D. men had followed us in a limousine. About a hundred meters away, a line of boxcars was standing. Between them and our paddy-wagon were rows of soldiers, with machine guns, supported by two powerful searchlights. Some of them had dogs that snapped at our heels as the soldiers shouted "Hurry! hurry!"



The lights, the dogs, the shouts, the misery of our present position, and the fear of what lay ahead, drove us to distraction. Despite our weakness, we ran with all our might, stumbling down a slope and up an embankment, carrying our belongings as best we could, arriving breathless at the train. Then it was again, “Hurry! Hurry!” as we entered the unusual cars. There were no windows facing the tracks. What light there was came from a grille which closed us off from the corridor. The compartment was divided horizontally in two; below there were seats for ten people and the upper compartment could hold twelve. Those in the seats could not stand without stooping; those above had to lie down or squat. Into these 24 places, 32 of us were crammed. Almost immediately I began to regret my layers of underwear and my warm winter coat. The heat was intolerable.

Fortunately Vasily Apollosevich, the Bulgarian colonel, and I were in the lower compartment. But we were so cramped that we couldn’t move, much less remove any clothing. And we had to stay alert in case we were called.



We discovered that in the center of the car there were cells for unruly prisoners. There, clad only in shirt and underwear, they were kept for hours, after vents had been opened to allow the frigid air to enter. There was no guarantee against pneumonia.

At the end of the corridor were the toilets, where we were allowed to go at fixed intervals, three times a day. Again it was a case of “Hurry! Hurry!” An armed guard patrolled the corridor, cursing occasionally at those who spoke too loud, but looking on while some of us were being robbed.

I learned later that these cars were called Stolypinskis, after the former government minister who had invented them to carry to Siberia those banished by the Czar. The Soviets had not hesitated to preserve this remnant of a regime that they deplored. In fact, they had to build more to keep in step with the increasing number of prisoners.

At the outset, we were given a supply of bread and dry, salted fish; we were supposed to make this last until the next stop. Who could

predict when that would be? One of the guards told us that the trip would last four days, but he did not tell us where we were going. We had the impression that we were heading east, and that was born out when we crossed a very long bridge. That, we decided, had to be the Volga. But the “four days” was depressing... Worn out before we began, squeezed together, unable to move, dying of heat and thirst, with salt fish, and only three glasses of water a day, without sleep. how could we survive? Once or twice the train stopped to take on water or take on more prisoners, who were jammed into the over-packed coaches. From one of them, we learned that we had just passed through Kazan. These days seemed an eternity; we plumbed the very depths of fatigue. And we exhausted our food supply.

Suddenly we were at Sverdlovsk, formerly Ekaterinburg, in Siberia. The guards screamed at us to leave the train, and made us sit on the ground in rows of five. We were counted, counted again, and marched out of the station. It was good to breathe the brisk, clear air, and extraordinary to see people in the streets, freely going about their business. They dared throw only furtive glances at us. As for us, we almost wanted the road to be long, so that we might feast our eyes on scenes almost forgotten during these last eight months. Sverdlovsk is one of the main cities in the Urals, and is the largest industrial center in the whole region. Machinery for foundries and mining is manufactured there.

After a few minutes of marching, we were stopped before the gates of a large prison which welcomed us with scant ceremony. No booths, no long questioning. Just the ritual bath. I took advantage of the announcement that whoever had luggage could leave it in a cloakroom. During the four days that we stayed there, Vasily Appollosevich and I were inseparable and found it interesting to compare impressions. To me, the greatest novelty was to see a Siberian bath: it was built entirely of

wood and I was amazed to notice around the doors and windows a condensation so thick that one would have thought that a snowstorm had gone through the building.

We undressed and left our clothes on benches. When we emerged from the baths, we discovered that everything had been hurriedly passed through the disinfecting ovens and had been tossed into a heap on the floor. Our shoes had been piled up in a corner. A real fist fight broke out. Our Crimean land-owner had thought, wrongly, that another prisoner had stolen his shoes. Despite the difference in their ages, 60 vs. 25, they fought it out. At the end, the Crimean had his shoes, but also a bleeding and swollen face, courtesy of his younger adversary.

RECEPTION LINE

A soldier opened the door and I entered my cell, followed by an old Armenian from Bucharest. To the right and left, the occupants had formed a double line, in order of precedence, down to the lowest little sneak thief. Each one awaited his turn to plunder the “spawn,” as they called all outsiders.

The old Armenian and I fell into the hands of the chief racketeer who was at the head of the line. He grabbed each one of us by the collar and pushed us into a corner of the cell. First, he fingered with interest the jacket that my companion was wearing, and with even greater dexterity than that of the soldiers he searched all the pockets and recesses. Finally he said “Take off your jacket.” The old man protested he had nothing else to wear. The hands stopped examining and were raised menacingly. He did as he was ordered.

Then came my turn. I remembered the Czech journalist and what he had said about the bandits in Krasnaia Presna. If you offer them something as a gift, they will be satisfied, at least for the time being. I tried it. I winked at the bandit and looked down at my well-worn winter-

sports trousers, that I was wearing over another pair. "Would you like these? In France, they are used for skiing." He was fascinated by the zippers on the pockets. "Sure," he said, "and to reward both of you, come with me." He led the way to his "headquarters" on the upper tier of bunks, sat down on the straw mattress and said, "I'm sure you're hungry." As he spoke, he drew from under a pile of stolen goods a little pan and two plates. He heaped them with peas and handed them to us. We glanced at each other in amazement but knew better than to ask questions. The peas were very sweet, a welcome change from our diet of salt fish.



That night, we were assigned a place on a mattress. Our bandit took care of us for two days, then told us we were then on our own. I began to understand the title in which these men glory, "honest thieves," a Russian phenomenon.

The sweet peas puzzled me; but when our meals were served, I began to understand. In the mornings, the rations of bread and sugar passed through the hands of the racketeers, who took their (lion's) share and distributed the rest to the cell-mates. At noon, we had peas. Two women brought a huge pot into the center of the room. There they filled several bowls with peas and left them to one side; this was the reserve

supply for the racketeers, to be used as payment for what they hoped to steal. The rest was portioned out. I can't complain, because I profited from the system.

When the boss racketeer had finished with me, his lieutenant, Yacha, a Jew from the Urals, came over and said, "Your shirt's not bad. Let me see how it looks on me." He donned it over his jacket and moved to another corner of the cell to play cards.

When the administration commission came, a couple of days later, and asked whether we had any complaints, some named Yacha. He was expelled from the cell, taking all his loot with him. Not one thing was restored to its rightful owner. Later I heard that there was an arrangement between the thieves and the guards, under terms of which the guards sold the goods in the city and shared the proceeds with the crooks. I can readily believe this because I was later a witness to such deals.

On January 10, we left this awful place. We were ordered to go down to a large hall on the ground floor, nicknamed the "station." The bandits were not leaving, but they managed to join the crowd. As long as we had anything left, they had work to do. The hall was large, but there were so many people crammed in that I could find no place to sit, or even crouch. So I spent another sleepless night, on my feet. In the morning we were given old military caps, called Budyenny, after the old Soviet marshal. I looked at mine with revulsion. It was ugly, and to me represented many horrible things.

Trucks were waiting for us at the prison gates. We climbed in, forty men to a truck, along with the luggage. We hardly had room to stand, but were ordered to squat. We did what we could, and were very uncomfortable. The trip lasted a half-hour, and I can't remember anything more painful than those thirty minutes. At the rail station we found our Stolypinski cars waiting. It was back to crowded conditions,

stifling atmosphere, dry bread, salt fish, and the uncertainty of our destination.

CHAPTER EIGHT

PETROPAVLOVSK AND KAZAKHSTAN

YACHA'S REVENGE

From the outset of our journey we fell among thieves. Yacha was in our compartment, along with three or four of his cronies. I was surprised to see him, because I did not think that he was being shipped out. Anyway, he looked around and said, "Gentlemen, I shall be your 'brigadier' in the camp." That was his way of saying that he would wreak revenge on those who had denounced him in Sverdlovsk.

This time, we were told that our trip would last two days. Yacha went to work right away, and it was my fine Merino-wool coat that caught his fancy. It was important enough for him to discuss it with his buddies, and they decided that they would pay me by giving me a sheepskin coat. It was neither new nor beautiful, and the wool peeked forth from many holes. The collar, which at one time had been fur, was especially shabby. But, after some repairs, it would be just as warm, and less likely to show dirt, as my good coat. In handing it over, Yacha said to me "If anyone ever tries to steal this from you, just tell him that you got it from 'the father's house,' and he will leave you alone."

What he said was true. Those mysterious words saved my miserable coat from all who coveted it, right to the very end. Among the thieves, there was obviously some code of honor which was everywhere respected.

Soon after this, a young man was brought into our compartment. He had been arrested for a couple of days' absence from work. He was neatly dressed, but Yacha soon convinced him to part with his white

down-filled jacket. It would no longer be of any use to him. It might even be a source of annoyance, for it would be a constant temptation for thieves, who might beat him to get it. Because his crime of sabotage had earned him a sentence to the labor camps, it would be much better to have something simpler, and darker in color, “just like the one I have here.” Once again the public benefactor made a profitable exchange.

Later, he wanted my blanket. He proved to me that it was foolish to take the trouble to carry it, “because either everyone in the camp will be given one, or else they will confiscate yours. It would really be better for you to give it to me.” If the bandit of Sverdlovsk had been an honest thief, the one on the train robbed you politely, and even promised you further tokens of his gratitude. “You’ll see, when we arrive, I’ll make it up to you.” Meanwhile, he devoted all his time to enriching himself.

PETROPAVLOVSK

Our advance information proved correct: a bit less than two days later, we arrived at Petropavlovsk, in the extreme north of the Republic of Kazakhstan, on the Trans-Siberian rail line and the River Ichym.

There was deep snow everywhere. From the station Petropavlovsk seemed to be just a large village, with wooden houses scattered here and there, without much of a plan. There were some charming little houses. These had been built at the turn of the century by Russian colonists who had settled down to farm the very fertile soil or raise cattle. The stylish elegance of the wood-carvings adorning the windows and cornices were in sharp contrast with the rough log walls. I noticed panels, now empty, from which, at one time, icons would have gleamed.

There were other buildings, more vulgar, of rough-cast brick, daubed with yellowish paint. The largest and most important one was the slaughter house and the adjacent packing factory which had been named after Mikoyan. As we continued toward the center of town, someone

pointed out a large brick building which, we were told, was the mosque. Most of the people of Kazakhstan are Moslems. Our interest was particularly aroused by a hunter who crossed the square in front of us. On his shoulders he carried the carcass of a big wolf that he had probably killed somewhere nearby.

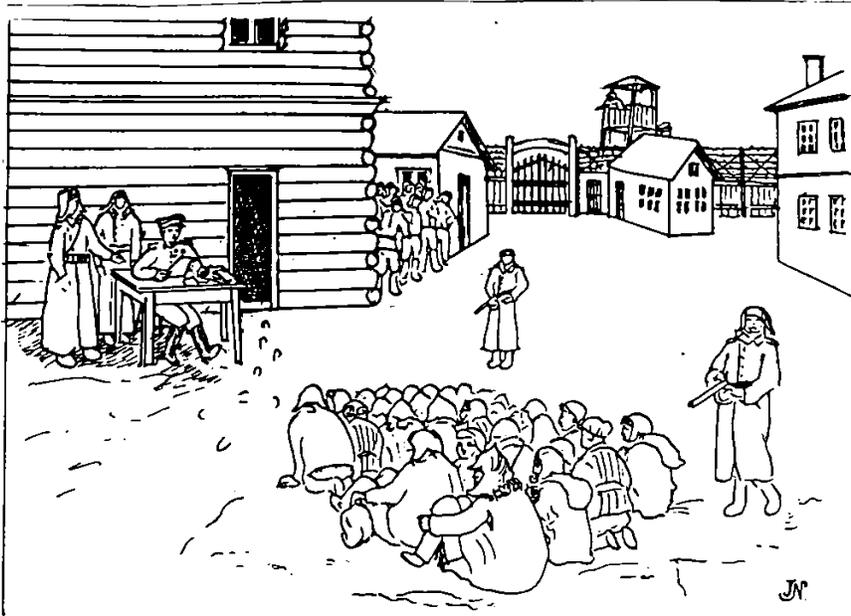
Over the Ichym was a long wooden bridge, badly damaged. The guards made us turn to the right and cross the river on the ice. Then we were outside the village, and before us stretched the steppe.

We marched without knowing where we'd stop. Many men were so tired that they could go no further. An older man told the guards, "Shoot me right here if you want, but I can't go another step." We were allowed to rest awhile, and when a sled went by the soldiers requisitioned it to carry the weakest men.

Our destination was some eleven kilometers outside the town. In the distance we could vaguely make out some buildings. Near me, one of the soldiers said mockingly, "The poor devil, he's getting tired carrying his bag. The crowd in there will soon empty it." I decided to do as in Sverdlovsk and put my luggage in the cloakroom.

THE PERESELKA

Dragging ourselves along, we finally reached the Pereselka or meeting place. We had a long wait outside the wooden gate which bristled with barbed wire. They made us sit in the snow. When the gate was opened, we saw a courtyard flanked by three blocks of buildings. To the left, were offices; to the right, was the refectory; and in the middle, were the prisoners' quarters.



The old-timers formed a semicircle around us new arrivals. “Where are you from?” “How many years did they give you?” “Under what article were you condemned?”

Again we had to sit in the snow while waiting for the camp commandant, a half-drunk lieutenant, who sat down heavily behind a table on which he placed all our dossiers. He began what was virtually a monologue: “Are any of you craftsmen? Blacksmith? We’ll see. So you are a carpenter? Can you put up a partition? Good. And you are a cook? We already have too many. A Professor! Can you handle a shovel?” When my turn came, I said, “I am an artist. I can paint and draw.” He was flipping through the pages of my dossier, and suddenly he said, “It says here that you are a priest. Why did you tell me that you were an artist?” “One doesn’t exclude the other,” I replied.

Then Yacha, bless his heart, intervened on my behalf, no doubt to pay for my overcoat. “Chief, I know this man. He is an artist, a great artist, and you can be sure of that.”

“All right,” said the officer, “can you do fancy work?” I wasn’t too sure what he meant, but my head was so heavy from fatigue, from

endless traveling, from sheer misery, that I was ready to grasp at anything that might allow me to rest awhile.

“Fancy work? I can do anything you want.”

“Very well. I’ll keep you here. Do you have any paints?”

“Yes. And some brushes too.”

“Good. I’ll send for you when I need you.” Then he continued down his list.

I must confess that I was somewhat relieved, although I didn’t know just what my work would entail. Optimistically I turned to one of the guards and asked If I could leave my luggage in the baggage room. He said that it was permitted, but that the place was closed for the night.

We were formed into ranks and marched Into the huge wooden house. There were three doors on the corridor, behind which we could hear the sound of many voices. My group went through the first door and we found ourselves in a dark and gloomy room full of people. In the confusion, I was separated from my traveling companions. Having



acquired by this time a wholesome fear of thieves, I made for the far end

of the room, put my bag on the floor against the wall, and sat on it. But not for long.

Less than five minutes later, a young man approached me and asked who I was. Before I could answer, I was sitting on the floor. While I had been looking at my questioner, his accomplice had roughly pulled my bag from under me. Of course, it vanished immediately. No one had seen anything. But little by little, whatever did not interest the thieves came back to me, piece by piece. Among them were my paints and brushes. Finally the bag itself came back, empty. The soldier whom I had overheard along the way was apparently very familiar with the custom of the house.

DAILY LIVING

With rare exceptions, the men detained were common-law criminals: murderers, bandits, and such. In this environment, “Article 58” men were rank outsiders, and had no right to any consideration whatsoever. The two rows of planks which acted as beds were already fully occupied, and there was nothing left for us to do except slide in under them and lie on the floor. I soon discovered that those on top were really not to be envied. Two days later, as a result of the constant change in personnel, I managed to get a place on the planks. Sleeping fully clothed and lying on our sides, we were so tightly packed that when one man wanted to turn everyone had to. To the vermin that I had picked up from the floor were now added two other types of insect, some from the wood, others from the men. And at this time the *pereselka* had no baths!

The daily schedule was very simple. In the morning, we washed, etc., out in the yard. Then came the distribution of black bread, which was 52% water and 48% various flours. We got 9 grams of sugar and as much hot water as we wanted. As the men said wryly, “Eat water, drink

water, and you will never have indigestion.” After this, we were locked up until noon, at which time we were given soup. Then the door was barred until the exercise period (half an hour) and then barred again. After our second allowance of soup, there was roll call. Then we could lie down. There wasn’t much chance of sleeping. Some were singing, or arguing, or fighting. Several played cards, although this was strictly forbidden. Eventually the uproar would die down and we tried to make the most of what was left of the night.

Usually the stay in the *pereselka* was short, and we were constantly meeting newcomers, each dirtier and emaciated than the others. These prisoners in transit had no right to a bath or to the services of a barber. In any case there were no baths here and none of us were particularly attractive. Some of the thieves made it a point of honor always to be clean-shaved; they had their chosen “valets” who did the barbering with a piece of broken glass. Some of them actually had real razors which, in some mysterious way, they had been able to conceal through all the searches.

These fellows also had other distinctive marks: they affected brightly colored shirts, and had the exclusive privilege of wearing a suit coat. They wore white trousers tucked into their real leather boots, and pulled down as low as possible over their ankles, accordion fashion. Much of their time was spent in beating out a rhythm on the floor with their feet, and in pouring out torrents of obscenities. Here too the soldiers were in cahoots with them, reselling stolen articles in exchange for tobacco, food, and even vodka, Many of them were epileptics.

Most of the prisoners smoked vile *makhorka* tobacco, wrapped in newsprint. There were no matches, but the men had an ingenious way of getting a light: they took a piece of cloth, preferably velvet, and rolled it between two pieces of wood until it ignited. It was not easy, and only “specialists” could do it.

After three days, I was moved to another room. The material conditions were identical, but this was a workers' room and the occupants, mostly peasants, were not so rowdy. They were kept here longer than the others and worked on outside jobs, under the supervision of two guards. The atmosphere in the room was less tense.. There were no squabbles, no thefts, and, on days when good work had been done, there was even a ration of stew, over and beyond the regular ration.

I spent about a month in this room, and discovered that my former traveling companions had been moved, after four days, to an unknown destination.

IN SACHA'S WORKSHOP

One morning, just as the men were leaving for their work, a prisoner whom I had never seen before came into our room accompanied by a guard. "Where is the artist?" he asked. As I stepped forward, he went on, "You are to come with me. The Boss says that you are to make a tapestry for him." He led the way to a loft attached to the main building. There were two rooms occupied by the permanent staff of the camp: bookkeepers, foremen, tailors, shoemakers, carpenters, blacksmiths, barbers, etc. Then my guide introduced himself as Sacha, originally from Baku, now a painter and decorator. He had a thin black mustache, trimmed in the fashion of his region. He turned out to be a very fine fellow indeed.

There was such a contrast here with what I had just left that it was hard to realize that these men were prisoners also. They had comfortable beds, their clothes were relatively neat, and they were allowed to move around freely within the whole area of the *pereselka* (some 500 square meters).

First I had to shave my ten-day-old beard. Then they served me tea. Then Sacha obtained permission for me to go outside the palissade,

where there were a bath and disinfecting oven. Then Sacha brought me into his workshop and explained his occupation.

“It’s quite simple,” he said, “the townspeople bring me photographs which they want to have enlarged, by hand. They pay the office and I get a percentage. Of course if I get a chance I deal with these clients privately and charge them less than the office does, and I keep the whole fee. In these camps a guy has to be resourceful.”

I was preoccupied by one question and immediately sought an answer. What did the Boss mean by a tapestry? “Don’t worry about that,” said Sacha. “You have plenty of time, and anyway, you are now working for me. In a couple of weeks we’ll talk about your tapestry. And he’ll have to furnish you with the materials. He’s in no great hurry.”

Finally, I did discover that a “tapestry” here meant a decorative panel of flimsy material that people usually hung on the wall above their bed. I decided that Sacha knew the ways of the place better than I; so I took his word for it and went to work for him on his various assignments. He was a fine artist and drew superbly. I lent him my paint brushes and we became fast friends.

He promised me that as soon as there was a vacancy in their hut he would have me transferred there. As a matter of fact, I went back to the workers’ hut only to sleep, and before long I was out of it for good.

I found this first winter in Central Asia particularly trying. It followed close upon a nine-month stay in prison, where the food was wretched, and I was exhausted by the terrible conditions of our long journey. All my woolen underwear had been stolen, and I was wearing only a light summer jacket over my shirt, with my sheepskin coat on top. Hunger and cold were constant companions, tenacious and undesirable. There was a small stove in the workshop, but we had to steal fuel. One day Sacha sent me to get some coal, amid a snowstorm. I came back with three fingers frostbitten.

MY NEW FRIENDS

I still had no spoon. There were knives in the workshop; so I began to look for a suitable piece of wood and carved a spoon for myself. I was now taking my meals with the “permanent guests,” who each had found an additional source of income. I lost nothing by the arrangement.

One of my companions, Djiurka, had at one time owned a fur store in Riga. He had got himself employed in the tailoring shop and did repairs on clothing sold in the store. He was a Jew, very obliging and friendly. He had a sister who had succeeded in going to America. Before the war, he sent her a telegram; and after his arrest, the Russian interrogator asked him to explain why the telegram had been written in English rather than in American. This officer did not know what language the Americans spoke.

Djiurka had been sent up near Arkhangelsk for two years, to cut timber. He told us that the plight of prisoners there was horrendous. In summer they were eaten alive by mosquitoes. In winter... well it was a northern winter! They had a quota of work for each day. Their ration of bread was attached to the last tree they were supposed to fell. Only after laboring almost to exhaustion did they arrive at their ration, which was often frozen.

One day, he and his companions were told that they were free and could return to their homes. His freedom was short; after a couple of months, he was again arrested and sentenced to ten years.

Then there was the camp messenger, who had a permit allowing him to go to the town alone. He was a Kazakh and a local man, small and old, with a skin like parchment, slanting eyes, short nose, and prominent cheek-bones that gave him the typical Mongol look. Like his compatriots, he was gentle and willing, and loyal. But he was extremely sensitive to slightness or lack of courtesy. He delighted in drinking

strong black tea, which he got from home in the form of briquettes, and which he drank by the liter. He had a slogan: “If there’s no tea, where can you get your strength?”

Vassia, a Ukrainian, was the musician of the group. He worked as a watchmaker and was skilled in repairs. The intricate mechanisms of the watches brought back from Europe by soldiers was a source of no small profit for him. As a result, he had been able to buy a guitar. He played it like a real artist.

Of course there had to be a clown. Ours was the barber, endowed by nature with a nose that fitted the role he chose to play. It would not have been wise to probe too deeply into his past. He rarely sat down. He found it more restful to squat and balance himself on the tips of his toes. He shaved us every five days, and for a three-ruble tip would massage us with Eau-de-Cologne, which the Kazakh bought for him in town. When he had no customers, he drank the stuff as an aperitif.

Finally, we had the engineer in charge of planning our work. He would draw up sketches which he then asked me to draw neatly and to scale. One day he reached into his bag and offered me a present: to my amazement, I recognized the bottom part of my cassock, which had been fashioned into a skirt.

Another day, I saw the shoemaker wearing the jacket of my pajamas as a shirt. Neither of them knew that I was the original owner of the garments in question, and I refrained from telling them.

Occasionally one or the other of the group would leave, but the general atmosphere of the place never seemed to change. There was good comradeship among us and as a result the work seemed more tolerable.

THE TAPESTRY AT LAST

Perhaps Lt. Pivorarov did drink too much, but he was very patient. After two weeks in the camp, I had not even begun his tapestry. Sacha kept me busy working on his portraits, decorating cigarette-cases and picture frames. One morning, I was summoned to the office.

“Well,” said Pivoravov, “How is my tapestry coming along? But never mind, we have plenty of time. I would like you to decorate my room...you know, little designs and flowers.” Bit by bit, I managed to carry out the work he had originally requested. I painted a very Romantic scene, with very unusual ornamentation. He was delighted with it, and I had his good will for the rest of my stay in the camp.

I couldn't count forever on the good will of my companions to have a supplement to the daily soup on the menu. The soup usually contained no vegetables, and was only a kind of broth made from bones. I felt very weak and would have to do something if I wanted to survive my eight-year sentence. One day I took a sheet of paper and a pencil and made my way to the kitchen. The cook was



irritable and aggressive. “What do you want? There's nothing for you here. Go away!”

When she stopped for breath, I gently said, “I just thought that you might like roe to draw a portrait of you.”

She looked at me in frank disbelief, but my confident manner must have softened her mood. “Can you make portraits?”

“Well, I have pencil and paper here. If you have a few minutes to spare, you can see for yourself.”

“No, not now. Come back at five o’clock when there are no officers around.” I did as she said and in a few minutes shoved her the portrait.

“This is wonderful,” she cried, “I’m going to send it to my mother. Do you have a bowl? I’m going to give you some soup.”

It was fine soup, and for the next few days I went back to the kitchen for my “payment.” But the cook, like most people in the camp, was only in transit. Her successor, I soon discovered, also liked portraits and was equally generous with soup. Apparently I was in business. I certainly began to feel stronger.

THE TELEGRAM

At the end of February, I was amazed to be called to the office to pick up twenty five rubles. This was my salary for the month. With this fortune in my pocket, I immediately had a flash of inspiration. Here in the far reaches of Siberia, it was most unlikely that any of the officers knew the street address of the French Embassy in Moscow. What would happen if, under pretext of begging for money, I would let them know exactly where I was and possibly provoke an intervention on my behalf? I had tried many times while in Moscow to get in touch with Father Leopold Braun, a fellow Assumptionist who ministered to Catholic diplomats. So I wrote: “To Citizen X, such a number, such a street, in Moscow, send me some rubles. Signed: Nicolas.”

I took the paper to the office. They charged me six rubles, I think, and the censor let it through. Three weeks later a money order arrived, and I was overjoyed that my people, after hearing nothing from me in over a year, would at last know where I was and possibly try to help me.

But things didn’t stay there. Accidentally I discovered that steps had been taken. It must have been in April, because I remember that the Ichym river was in flood and everyone had been sent out to reinforce the pebble-wall dyke and the pilings. Just before noon, Sacha came over to

me and said, "The 'compere' wants to see you." "Compere," in prison slang, meant the N.K.V.D. officer in charge of discipline, and in this case he happened to be a Mongol. First, he asked me whether I had much correspondence. I told him that since my arrest I had not written nor received any letters.

"You have never written to anyone asking them to intervene on your behalf?" he asked sharply.

"That's right. I have never made such a request."

"But how do you explain..." he began, then realized what he had done. My plan had obviously succeeded, so I said "Listen, I sent a telegram asking a friend in Moscow to send me some money. The censor had no objections, and the camp office sent out the message. That is all I know about it."

That was the end of the interview, and, I thought, of the whole question. Eight years later, on my return to France, I was amazed to hear the rest of the story. My priest friend in Moscow, who had been transferred in the meantime, had received two or three more telegrams, supposedly from me, each asking for money. A lady whom I did not know got a letter, in French, in which I told her that like her husband I was vacationing and that I would spend a long time convalescing. I was supposedly spending my leisure making portraits of my "friends," and that I would be happy if she could send me some colored pencils and paints and such funds as she could spare. This lady, I was told, was the custodian of the Catholic church of St. Louis in Moscow.

When I heard these stories, I had to admit to a grudging admiration for the skill of the NKVD. As *agents-provocateur*, they were masterly.

LIFE IN THE WORKSHOP

All things considered, life in Sacha's workshop was varied and interesting. True, we were supervised, but as long as the orders sent in by the office were carried out on schedule, no one put pressure on us. We had plenty of leisure: we smoked and chatted with one another or with the shoemakers who were our neighbors, and who were *really* a privileged class. On the side, they made shoes for the officers of the camp and their families. Consequently they always had an abundance of food and even delicacies.

If only they had been contented with this, I would have found them very congenial neighbors. But they used their "wealth" to attract women prisoners who were either hungry or greedy; and as our workshops were even more secluded than their own, they often asked us politely to move out and leave them free use of the room. Sacha too had his flirtations and could not understand why I did not wish to carry on in the same way. "You are a strange guy," he would say, but he went out of his way to tell the visiting women to stay away from me. One of them tried to ignore his warning, and I am afraid I pushed her away rather roughly. She got the message.

Occasionally, all of us, transients and permanents, would be required for some urgent fatigue duty. Once they took us out to plant potatoes in a field near the camp. The strategy was well planned, but its execution left much to be desired. When the overseers were not looking, some of the men slipped as many as ten seed potatoes in the same hole, so as to finish more quickly. Others drove the seed into the ground with their heels to avoid stooping. Some even busied themselves filling the holes before they had been planted. When these "shock attacks" were over, we resumed making portraits, either from life or from photos, or decorating small boxes and cigarette cases with a mosaic of colored straw.

THE UNFAITHFUL STEWARD

One morning there was a rumor that something serious had happened. The guards and officers seemed very excited and disturbed. Later we found out that the Comptroller of the camp, a very pleasant man, usually dressed partly as a soldier and partly as a civilian, had absconded with all the funds of the camp and had left the store completely empty. No doubt, he had provided himself with false papers. He vanished without leaving a trace. We were greatly amused by the visible chagrin of the other officers.

The fugitive was replaced by a lieutenant who, on his very first visit, decided that our workshop would make an ideal depot for the storage and distribution of bread. We had to move out. Sacha installed himself in our dormitory. I was given a large landing on the first floor of the same building. Soon after, Sacha was sent away. Now I was the only artist left in camp.

ON THE LANDING

The staircase near my new quarters led to a wide corridor on which were the infirmary, the doctor's office, the clothing store, and the female-staff room. Each incoming group of prisoners (and new ones came in every day) had to have a medical inspection. On their way, they had to pass by my "studio." They were noisy, and, as I had been, very smelly. And there were the people who had business in the store. And young prisoners from below, who had obtained permission to see the doctor, roamed around everywhere, but especially around the female-staff room where they held long and mysterious conversations through the peephole.

The old workshop had been a haven of peace compared to this traffic-center. I tried to set up a kind of screen on the landing, but was never able to stop curious people from stopping and chatting.

Orders kept flowing in. The reputation of my “tapestries” had spread. Sometimes I had three or four jobs going on at once, with the cloth stretched on large wooden frames. I created landscapes or other scenes requested. Sometimes I even created my own designs. I worked there from May to October 1946, except for a period in another barrack, which I will deal with elsewhere. Every night I had to put my brushes and paints away very carefully. Otherwise I would not have had them long.

Something intrigued me: in the morning I would not find my paintings as I had left them. Even when they had been nailed to the wall, they would be found in another corner. On one occasion a guard discovered two men hiding behind the folding screen and marched them off to the punishment cells. Even after that my work was continually moved around, no doubt used as cover for some nefarious enterprise.

The general lawlessness was not confined to the night hours. I myself witnessed several abductions in broad daylight, in my own corridor. The bandits swooped down on the victims, threw them over their shoulders and carried them to a small room in the infirmary. The cellar, the bread store, even the toilets were popular meeting places. Apparently the guards were the only ones who knew nothing about these open secrets.

STALIN

One day, two officers came to my landing. “We notice that you have been doing a lot of portraits and paintings. We have another job for you. We need a life-size portrait of Comrade Stalin. Do you think you can do it? What do you say?”

“Well, I can always try. But I would need a good model.”

The next day, they brought me a large photograph taken from a newspaper, some canvas, and I started my work. NKVD men visited me every day to check the progress of the portrait. But the comments, when they were not around, were very revealing.

“Well, if it isn't the Little Father!”

“Is the ‘Mustache’ coming to stay a while?”

“You should be ashamed of yourself, wasting good time on a pig like him.”

“Don't spoil it. Otherwise you'll get another ten years for sabotage.”

In fact, I had to bring my picture to the guard post each night, to make sure no one destroyed it. I got grim satisfaction from the fact that nobody would be using “Comrade Stalin” as a screen for debauchery.

I finished the work in two weeks and the soldiers promptly took it away. They said it had to go before a Commission that would decide whether it was worthy to preside over a meeting hall. The verdict was favorable and I received eighty rubles.

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE FENCE

One unexpected result of my portrait of Stalin was my rise in the estimation of the guards. I became quite used to seeing them nudge each other when I passed. They'd point and whisper. So I suppose that I owe a small debt of gratitude to the Little Father of the People.

Soon after, the commandant of a nearby barrack came to me and said, “You did a fine job on that portrait of Stalin. Could you do other portraits for me? I want to decorate the barrack with pictures of our marshals, generals, and members of the Politburo. Come with me and we can talk things over.” He took me to his headquarters, some 500 meters away, and we looked around.

“Tell me what you need as materials, and I will personally see that you get them. We will come to pick you up in the mornings. You will spend the whole day here, and return to your barrack every night.”

Leaving the camp, even under guard, did not displease me. The soldiers in their barracks were completely different in their outlook. I worked indoors, without supervision, and if I wanted to take a breather now and then all I had to do was ask permission. The work kept me occupied for several months. I had to make 31 portraits, and I was asked to take special care in reproducing the many decorations with which my subjects had been honored. I feel that many of my portraits no longer hang on the walls, the “notables” having lost more than their medals.

The soldiers provided me with excellent breakfasts, followed by even better lunches. All I had to bring was my bread ration, which by now lasted two days. I got the same meals as the soldiers, thick vegetable soup, roasted or stewed meat, and sometimes a couple of pancakes. When I went back to my barrack, I received my regular ration, which I usually gave away. I must admit that the prominent members of the Party who were far away were more useful to me than the nearby cooks of the camp.

The soldiers, I noticed, had very little free time. Besides their guard duty, two hours on and two hours off, they had to escort the prisoners to work, go out on patrols, take part in military exercises, and, in the evenings, follow a course in military and political affairs. These political studies were directed by the Partog (Party Organizer) who was supposed to maintain and develop in his hearers the sacred flame of Marxism. The wall of their dormitory bore a slogan which speaks eloquently of the spirit in which they were trained: “Soldiers of the Red Army, never forget that the enemies of the People are capable of any villainy. Be always ready for any emergency.”

When the men did have a few moments off, the whole barrack resounded with their singing and the music of the *balan* (a kind of accordion).

ESCAPE OF THE MAN WITH A WOODEN LEG

Attempts at escape were rare and usually unsuccessful. Just before my assignment in the barrack, one extremely unlikely candidate managed to vanish completely. He was a cripple who worked as a shoemaker. His leg had been amputated just above the knee and he hobbled around on a wooden leg. He had come to see me several days previously, showed me a new cane and asked me to decorate the handle for him. Meanwhile he obtained permission for his wife to visit him. She brought quite a bit of money. No doubt, that was when he planned his escape, which was a classic in its simplicity.

Around three o'clock every morning, a Kazakh prisoner, unescorted, came to remove two or three large cans of our garbage. He had been doing this for quite a while, and the sergeant of the guard, not particularly anxious to breathe in the horrible stench, rarely inspected the containers. Probably no one ever offered the driver 3,000 rubles until the shoemaker came along. He yielded to the temptation. All he had to do was allow our friend to get into the truck while the searchlight guards were being changed, and then collect his garbage as usual.

Everything went perfectly. He drove through the guard-post without being inspected, and he emptied the garbage and the shoemaker near the river. The wife was waiting with a boat, some clean clothes and his dentures. He just changed his clothes, threw the old ones in the river, and landed somewhere on the other bank. With a final artistic touch, he sprinkled tobacco over his tracks, to throw any dogs off his scent.

Of course his absence was soon discovered and a general alert was sounded. There was no trace of the fugitive. An officer, who was

reputedly a good detective, was assigned to track him down. But when I passed through Petropavlosk a year later, the cripple was still at large.

The unfortunate driver was arrested. After a beating he admitted his role in the escape. The sergeant of the guard, an elderly man with a family, was also arrested. He had had an irreproachable record and was well-liked by his comrades. After some weeks in the punishment cell, he was brought to trial in the barrack where I was now working. From behind a door, I spied on the proceedings. In consideration of his years of good service and the esteem in which he was held, he was dismissed from prison service and sent back to civilian life. The driver was given two extra years in the camps; his sentence was not suspended.

MEN FOR THE FAR EAST

At least once a year, the camp had to organize and dispatch a convoy of prisoners to the Far East. The preparations and planning were long and meticulous. Three or four hundred men had to be outfitted, fed, and guarded during a trip that would take at least three weeks.

Women were appointed to take charge of feeding arrangements and of cleaning the train. When their tour of duty was ended, they returned to Petropavlosk or to a nearby camp.

For several days before the journey, the camp was extremely crowded as prisoners were brought in from various sectors. As a rule, these men were not the most desirable characters, because the camp commandants took advantage of the opportunity to get rid of troublemakers. Our guards, reinforced for the occasion, had their hands full.

Finally, the whole night before the great exodus was spent in a detailed inspection of all the travelers. Everything was confiscated, even down to balls of string, spoons, and pocket-mirrors. They had a right to their clothes only after every stitch and seam had been carefully

examined. Then they were marched out between two imposing lines of soldiers armed with submachine guns, and supported by fierce dogs. They headed off toward the Pacific in boxcars which had powerful searchlights on the roof, for use by the guards at night.

MY “CRIME”

For a few days after the departure of such convoys, the whole place seemed deserted and dead. Only a few of us “permanents” were left and we were put to work cleaning and whitewashing the cells. They certainly needed it. Soon new groups of transit prisoners began to arrive again. We were curious about these new arrivals and tried to speak furtively to them as they sat on the ground awaiting the arrival of the lieutenant. One day, from one of the groups, some one called out “Is there a Frenchman here?”

He was pointed out to me: a middle-aged man, totally bald but with a huge beard. I asked him if he was French. “No, I’m a Russian, but I studied in Italy, where I learned French.” He added that he had been sentenced to ten years for being a spy.

As he came past my landing on his way for the medical exam, we managed to exchange another few words and I found out that he was a priest. Then a guard rushed up, furious, threatening us with the punishment cell for speaking a foreign language. That is really all that happened, but three years later the NKVD made a great issue of it. When I was working in Vorkuta, I was summoned several times and asked to explain my links with this man and give details of the secrets we had exchanged. Anything at all is grist for the NKVD mill.

A RUMOR DIES

Not all the guards were as officious as the one who had reported me. Some even sought occasions to chat awhile and showed, as far as their duties allowed, a comparative benevolence toward the prisoners who caused them no trouble or from whom they expected some service. Some of them owned a cow and often sold milk in the camp rather than sell it in town. We could buy it for five rubles a liter. Lt. Pivorarov too had milk for sale but it was usually his wife who brought it on her way to her office. Everybody liked her because she was very kind and seemed to have sympathy for us.

Towards the end of April, 1946, someone in the office heard that I would soon be freed. A bit later, Mrs. Pivorarov repeated it to me and said a telegram to that effect had been received. I still did not dare believe it, even when the telegram-officer himself told me I would soon be going home.

All this took place shortly after I had sent my telegram to Moscow, and I felt it was not unlikely that some approaches had been made. Although I remained quietly hopeful, I had become too wise to attach much importance to such reports. This was just as well, because after the holidays in May the subject was never mentioned again.

NATIONAL HOLIDAYS

I remember well our celebration of May 1st and November 6 and 7 in Petropavlosk. The previous day, all the “enemies of the People,” that is all those condemned under Article 58, were assembled in one of the halls of the prison, emptied of its occupants for the occasion. We were locked up under close arrest after having been thoroughly searched. We were not even allowed the half-hour exercise period.

Meanwhile, at the neighboring 10 th Settlement, separated from the camp by a fence, several hundred common-law prisoners were enjoying games, dances, a movie, and permission to don their civilian clothes. We

could hear the laughter and the music through windows that were three-quarters covered by stout wooden shutters.

Nevertheless, in order to be just, I must add that normally, and especially on Sundays, we “permanents” had our recreation. There were games in the yard all during the afternoon; and on most evenings there were checkers and dominoes. From time to time we were led to the 10 th Settlement to see a movie, provided we paid the two-ruble admission fee.

Occasionally there were other diversions, such as the time when some of the prisoners mutinied. It seems they had some sort of dispute with one of the guards, who summoned the head guard, Pivorarov. As soon as he opened the door, the prisoners rushed him and badly beat him. The alarm was Immediately sounded and a strong force of soldiers came from the nearby barracks. They had difficulty in subduing the mutineers, who by then had scattered through the yard. We had to watch the proceedings from our window, because at the first sign of trouble we had been locked in our room.

AUTUMN, 1946

At long last, towards the end of the summer, the authorities decided to begin work on a bath-house for the camp. It was to be a wooden building about ten meters long, and the news was greeted with joy by everyone, especially by the barbers, who had had the depressing task of destroying the vermin brought in by newcomers.

For the last two months of my stay, I had been back among the ordinary laborers; but this time I had a mattress and a blanket. I spent only the night-time in the cell and no longer feared any hazing.

About this time another escape was attempted. A prisoner had blown all the fuses and three others had raised a ladder against the wall and had escaped. They were not so fortunate as our friend with the wooden leg. Two were recaptured almost immediately, and the other one, at the end

of three days. The results, as far as we were concerned, were very bad: discipline, which had been rather easy-going, became very annoying, oppressive, and sometimes intolerable, depending on the mood of the guards. It was very hard for me to continue my work, and I was never left a week in the same spot. The cold weather was setting in and my fingers were almost numb.

Finally, I went to see Lt. Pivorarov. “Citizen Chief (an obligatory form of address), I just cannot work under these conditions. I have been condemned to eight years in the re-educational work camps, not in prison. At present we are living a prison regime. I must respectfully ask you to have me transferred to a real labor camp.”

You’re certainly within your rights in making this request. But before you leave, would you make me another tapestry?’ V

“O.K., but then?”

“I promise that you will be transferred immediately.”

My final assignment was under way when the barracks Commandant came to me and said that he too wanted a tapestry. “Look,” he said, “while you were working for me, you were very well treated. The least you can do for me before you leave is to paint me a picture.”

Then in came Marusia, the woman-soldier who was on guard duty. She had just married a junior lieutenant who worked with us and who had been noisily and embarrassingly frank about the fact that Marusia had retained her virginity. Before leaving for her honeymoon, she had brought me a pound of butter as advance payment for a picture. I told her that I would never have time to paint it. She insisted that I keep the butter and that she would her chances.

So I went back to Pivorarov and asked that he give me a definite date for my departure. He said I would work until December 31 and that on New Year’s day I would definitely be leaving. I heard this with some

misgivings, because I felt that on January 1 he would be rolling about under the table, incapable of thinking or remembering.

This time I was wrong. I was still working on Marusia's picture on December 31 when I was given the order I had last heard in Moscow: "Have your belongings packed for tomorrow."

I was going south, to Karaganda.



CHAPTER NINE

IN CENTRAL ASIA

LEAVING PETROPAVLOSK

“For the New Year, towards new happiness.” That is the usual Russian New Year’s wish. I didn’t know what 1947 would bring me. A year before I had left Moscow; now I was leaving Petropavlosk. A year hence, on New Year’s day, I would leave for a six and a half-year stay at Vorkuta, north of the Arctic Circle.

Just now I was happy to leave for the unknown, because we always hope for the best, according to the old Russian proverb, “Everything is great, just where we are not.”

At the moment, things looked quite good. Only seven or eight of us would be traveling together. We had been given a couple of days’ ration of bread, sugar, and salt-fish. I had bought two extra pieces of bread, for 3 rubles each, from our own private black market. I said goodbye to my companions. Probably because of my famous portraits, the guards recommended me to the soldiers of the convoy, and we left by truck for the rail station, about seven miles away. The deferential treatment continued just as I was about to enter the train with my companions. A voice announced that “the artist” was to ride in the compartment reserved for the soldiers. Of course it followed that I had to draw portraits each time the train stopped.

It took us two days to cover the three hundred and seventy mile trip to Karaganda, the coal-mining center of Kazakhstan. This coal and the proximity of rich iron-bearing seams at Temir-Tau had caused the city to

develop tremendously and become the second most important one in Kazakhstan.

In the camps they tell the story about the man who laid out the plans for the city, and who received many decorations and awards for his work. Once Karaganda was completed, it was discovered that the city lay above the two best mineral seams; they could not be exploited. The urban planner was arrested and sentenced to several years in the camps, for lack of foresight and sabotage.

The train brought us another ten miles to Karabas, the temporary end of our voyage. Karabas is the ideal spot for a transit-camp. Through it pass all the prisoners destined for the huge Karlag (Regional Camp) from which they are scattered among the twenty-odd *oidelenie* (divisions) extending over thousands of square miles of almost deserted steppes. A division can sometimes cover 20,000 acres.

At Karabas, we had our bath and routine medical exam and were installed in huts. The furnishings were primitive: just two tiers of planks in four lines, running the whole length of the room. There were fifteen huts, each with its supervisor who did all he could to keep out strangers.

Life in the camp was spent mostly outside, in the yard, which became a kind of international crossroads where languages and races intersected. Barter and theft abounded amid jostling confusion.

Unlike Petropavlosk, men and women here were, to some extent, separated by a few strands of barbed wire. There were Ingushes and Tchitchenes from the southern republics, along with Uzbeks. Turkmen, Armenians, Georgians, Kabardines, Ocotines, men from Kazakhstan, Central Russia, the Urals, and the Ukraine. There were Baits, Poles, Rumanians, Hungarians, Germans, Jews from almost everywhere, and I, a lonely Frenchman. I felt that I had been caught in a whirlwind. There were, of course, no obligatory work parties, because of the constant

arrivals and departures. It was impossible to know how many prisoners were there at any given time.

A TYPICAL DAY AT KARABAS

After rising, we washed. I use the word loosely: hut by hut, in single file, we passed by an overseer who rapidly poured into each one's palm a half-cup of water. Usually we were only able to moisten our lips and our nose. Then we returned to the planks upon which we had slept, and squatted or crouched there until we had received our bread ration. Twice, when there was no bread, we got instead a bowl of some kind of porridge.

The number of rations to be served was calculated, not by a roll call, but by a quick head-count. This was done by an overseer who, it was said, had been implicated in the murder of Kirov. His performance was a minor distraction: he simply walked quickly along the edge of our planks. Yet, he never miscalculated. He was known as "The Commandant," enjoyed great popularity and was feared by all, especially by the bandits. They couldn't stand him and demonstrated their feelings some months later when two or three of them bludgeoned him with an ax. I found out about this when I passed through Karabas for a second time, in October, 1947.

We spent our mornings loitering about the yard. At noon, we received three quarters of a liter of oatmeal gruel in an earthenware bowl. We loitered again until evening assembly. The only source of interest was the *nariadchiks* who went through the huts posting lists of prisoners who were about to leave.

Towards five o'clock, we were given more oatmeal, but less than at noon. After that we entered the huts, because it was too cold to hang around in the snow. To kill time, some prisoners drew rather childish landscapes on the wall. Their efforts were quite good, considering their

“tools” which were anything that could leave a mark. The fact that their drawings were covered with whitewash every couple of days did not discourage them. They just opened a new “studio” which lasted just as briefly. I never felt the urge to compete with them.

During my walks, I got to know several of the prisoners. I remember especially one who spoke French quite well. He had been the President of the Catholic Youth in his country. I remember also two Russian monks who must have been arrested recently, because they still had their beards, their long hair, and their wide, flowing robes.

THE “INDIES”

When a prisoner was disorderly, the “Commandant” quickly brought him back into line by threatening to send him to the “Indies.” Was it a magic word? Unfortunately not! it meant a hut at the far end of the yard, as dilapidated and dirty as you can imagine, strongly surrounded by barbed wire.

Those detained there seemed to live partially or completely naked even in the winter cold. They would come out to relieve themselves on the doorstep. They were considered incorrigibly anti-social even in this kind of environment. They were vicious criminals, who had a law unto themselves. They were inveterate gamblers who, having no other stakes, bet their last items of clothing. Then they wagered on the life of the last fellow sleeping on the planks. Before the night was over, the loser had to kill his man, or his own life was forfeit. We had to witness such events, whether we wanted or not.

I also remember a somewhat less tragic story about gambling in Petropavlosk. A group of common-law prisoners, despite the strict prohibition against such games, regularly played cards in their cell. One day, a conscientious guard looked through the peephole and caught them red-handed. He unlocked the door, went in and demanded the cards.

“You are mistaken,” he was told, “we have no cards.”

“What! I saw them with my own eyes.”

“That is impossible,” said the men, “but go ahead and look for them. If you find any, you can do what you want with us.”

The guard searched the room and the men, but he found nothing. He was not at all satisfied, and kept an eye on them. They were going on with their game so he went back into the cell and searched, in vain. This time, he went to the warden and made charges against the prisoners. Both of them went to the cell and again demanded the cards. They got the same reply and made another fruitless search. The warden knew he was beaten and tried another approach, no doubt to save face. “Look,” he said I know you are playing cards and must be very clever players.

Satisfy my curiosity and tell me where you hid the cards. I give you my word that you will not be punished.”

They told him that the cards were in his pocket. They were!

AT LAST

I took advantage of the black market to trade the one pair of pants I still had from Odessa. They were threadbare and too light for this time of year. In exchange I received a pair with cotton padding, but I had to throw in two bread rations. Then I saw my companions, one by one, move on to other destinations. I alone remained, for 13 days. Before leaving, we were again searched, not by soldiers, but by their delegates, who were adept pickpockets. Their nimble fingers sped over us, removing small items like handkerchiefs and socks. I had a few small saucers to mix my paints in. They disappeared and the robber told me that he too was an artist.

We started out for the station, some 300 yards away. There we were loaded into cattle-cars that had been clumsily converted into two-berth affairs by the addition of an upper floor of planks. In the middle was a

small iron stove, no luxury, as this was now mid-January and bitterly cold.

The train lurched forward. During the night the cold became unbearable. One by one, the planks were broken up to stoke the stove, even though we had neither axe nor knives. We did not become noticeably warmer. The 40 odd men in the car seemed fairly decent. There were exceptions, like the man who suddenly raised a shout that someone had stolen his tobacco. It was only a trick by a crook, who wanted the chance to search pockets and bundles.

We traveled all night before the train suddenly stopped at a station. We had not yet been fed and were terribly hungry. So we imitated our comrades and banged on the padlocked doors, shouting "We want bread. We want bread." After a while, the guards opened the doors and gave us our bread ration.

At about 4 P.M., after traveling for some 24 hours, we arrived at Agadir, some 125 miles south of Karaganda. We were given shelter in a small, very primitive camp. The next morning, the elderly and the sick were placed to one side to await the sleds that would pick them up later. The rest of us got orders to march westward on foot, over a trail that was barely visible in the snow.

A LONG WALK

The railroad station at Agadir was surrounded by a few modern buildings such as warehouses, factories, or dwellings for the personnel. The village itself was very primitive: clusters of small, low huts whose walls of sharp stones supported a roof of stone slabs or branches mixed with straw and dirt. Everything of course was covered with snow. Through the narrow windows, we glimpsed smoke-filled interiors. Pairs of eyes peered at us.

We ate our rations and marched out with steady steps. At the end of our 15 mile trip, things would be quite different. We were about 60 to 85 people, as I remember. Before long our group straggled over several hundred yards. The snow got deeper. We tried to walk in the footsteps of the fellows in front of us. Our conversations dwindled into silence. The soldiers, keeping pace with us, brought up the rear. They allowed us a short break after three hours, so that we could re-group.

We were now walking through those curious landscapes that I had seen pictured on the walls of our hut at Karabas. The plain was studded here and there with low hills three or four hundred yards high. Rocky and barren, they seemed to have been poured from the same mold. Our route went in and around them and opened up on another batch of similar hillocks.

Our progress was slow and painful. When the sleds caught up to us, the soldiers advised us to pile our baggage onto them. We should have known what would happen. When we stopped for the night, we discovered that everything of any value had been stolen by the sled-drivers.

We arrived at a sort of farm dependent on the camp, where about 20 prisoners, men and women, were living under the supervision of two guards. We were fed hot soup, which was very welcome. But we spent an uncomfortable night, squeezed together.

The next morning we made an early start on the twenty miles we still had to cover. This part of the march was the most painful. To yesterday's exhaustion was added today's. The line of stragglers stretched out longer and longer. The soldiers tried to encourage us: "Buck up, we're almost there."

We ate snow to refresh ourselves. Around noon, our hopes were raised when we saw some buildings in the distance. But we were told that these were only the outbuildings in the camp vegetable gardens. Our

destination was two miles further on. An hour later, we arrived at Artau, the “capital” of the XIth *oidelenie*, to which we had been assigned. God be praised, we could rest at last! But before that, we had to go through the usual ritual of admission, with which we were by now thoroughly familiar: checking of documents, the bath, and assignment to huts. The medical exam took place in the baths. The doctor had only one simple test by which he ascertained the state of health of each of us. He simply pinched our buttocks. According to the greater or lesser firmness of the flesh, he decided what category of work each one was capable of. Then, at some length, he impressed upon the barber the importance of shaving our bodies completely. He himself selected the first victim, me. He stayed to supervise the operation.

All our possessions were again disinfected. I had kept my eyeglasses, but had imprudently placed them on a window ledge while washing my head. They promptly disappeared. This was too much. I could accept the loss of other useful articles, without too much protest. Without glasses, I was completely helpless. I notified the authorities and an immediate search was made. The glasses could not be far away: we were completely nude and the doors of the bath room were bolted. The glasses were found behind the frame which held the camp rules. The thief was a local man who had slipped among our small group. He was given a sound beating.

We were then taken inside the compound which was surrounded by a stockade and barbed wire. We were turned loose in a yard about 200 yards square. There the “Commandant” took over. He was a Jewish political prisoner, originally from Baku, the capital of Azerbaidzhan, on the Caspian Sea. From this very first meeting, and from his intelligent and forceful words, we recognized that he was the right man for the position. He took us into one of the four rooms that opened onto the yard. There were two rows of bunks, one on a sort of embankment of

leveled earth, while the upper tier was formed of woven dried branches. Both were hard but we were satisfied enough just to be able to stretch out and sleep.

NEW SURROUNDINGS

Our new lodgings were deceiving: more than 150 men squeezed into the cramped quarters. Still, there was a praiseworthy attempt to keep the place clean. The weather was frigid; the food was meager. A watch tower and guard post flanked the main entrance. To the left was a very dirty and disgusting spot that had daunted all the cleaners. In front was a small yard, only a few yards square surrounded by barbed wire: this was the isolation block for disorderly prisoners. At the far end of the yard were two other cells. On our right was the narrow opening through which was passed our food.

On the other side of the partition, in the same block of buildings but outside the zone, were the club, the recreation hall, rooms for prisoners who were not locked up, the kitchen and the refectory.

Other huts were scattered here and there, with a small distance between them. These held the Sanitation Department, two new huts for the women, various outbuildings and annexes. And there were the workshops: forge, carpentry and pottery. Detached from the main group and located near the animal sheds, was a fine building housing the dairy where butter was made. It goes without saying that these places were strictly off-limits to anyone not on the staff.

The countryside to the south had some pleasant aspects. A tree-lined stream flowed along a wide avenue, at the end of which were two administration buildings, the post-office and the school. Also in this section were the mill, staff offices, and the living quarters of the civilian staff and military personnel. There was also the provision store, for free people only, and the camp kitchen.

About 150 prisoners lived outside the compound, but these were almost all common-law criminals. If political prisoners were allowed to work outside the compound, they had to return to eat and sleep, and their work had to be in the immediate vicinity of the camp. Others were often given permits for some specific journey, allowing them to go with their trucks to Agadir or to the various farms controlled by our XI th Division. Naturally, they made good use of this semi-freedom to develop their own private enterprises.

THE XITH DIVISION AND ITS ORGANIZATION

The territory of our little Division extended over more than 12,000 acres and contained about 20 farms and many small depots for the improvement of the land. The garden-farm provided the center with vegetables, and the other farms were given over to the raising of long-tailed sheep. Sometimes their tails were so heavy that the sheep were harnessed to a small cart to help them carry it. All told, there must have been over 14,000 sheep and at least 300 head of cattle.

Winter in Kazakhstan is long and harsh. An enormous amount of fodder had to be stored up to feed the herds during the winter months. During the summer the able-bodied prisoners were sent into the steppe to make hay. They lodged in tents within a temporary enclosure surrounded by barbed wire. Several mowing machines were kept busy in the vast expanses between the barren mountains. To be prepared for these haying operations, teams of blacksmiths and mechanics spent the whole winter servicing and repairing the machines. At the forge they had a rather unusual pet, a tame eagle, which it was dangerous to get too close to.

In the spring, lamb-shearing was the prime occupation. This was also the season for conventions in the club-house. Challenges to workmanship and ability were launched and accepted. Afterwards, the workmen would criticize and accuse themselves and promise higher

quotas of work, which of course were never met. Then came the distribution of awards and praise, and of reproaches, if they were deserved. The whole affair ended with a concert given on the club stage with whatever talent was available.

Once a week, trucks hauled to Agadir cases of top-quality butter, usually consigned to Alma-Ata, Karaganda or other large cities. We prisoners never got even a gram of this butter which we had produced. Our official ration of black bread was 700 grams a day, or 900 for those doing heavy labor. At breakfast we got some peas and the water in which they had been cooked. At noon, we got a soup of cabbage and potatoes to which was added one spoonful (never more) of boiled meat or fish. Our evening meal was about 30 peas in hot water. This diet gave rise to a little saying which every prisoner remembers: "We have no need of bacon or butter, because the sun, air, and water are the great Russian foods."

Every day the "Sanitation worker" made his inspection of all the cells and took a list of all the sick. The "Prisoner in charge of work" came to look for his men. Generally, our work consisted of sorting vegetables at the depot (for this there were always plenty of volunteers) or making *samanes* (a kind of block of clay and straw used as building material). Besides these jobs done in the camp itself, two groups of men had the task of supplying fuel. This was of great importance, but it was no easy task. There were no forests near the camp. The steppes are simply rocks and grass. The only type of firewood was a kind of Juniper bush. To collect it involved traveling distances from 10 to 20 miles. Equipped with small hooks, the teams went out daily leaving the bushes they had uprooted to be collected later by a number of trucks.

THE PRISONERS' REVENGE

The steppe was vast; escape might seem easy to the prisoners. So the guards were very watchful and strict. One team of prisoners had a problem with one of the soldiers who was especially strict.

One day, a prisoner, seeing a splendid Juniper bush just one step outside the fixed zone, could not resist the temptation to cut it down. Immediately he was hit by a bullet fired without warning, by the guard in question. The prisoners decided to avenge their comrade. The ten of them went to the camp officials and reported that the guard had on several occasions made unpatriotic proposals to them, hiding his hostility to the regime by a show of excessive zeal. There was an inquiry and the soldier denied the accusation. The prisoners stuck to their story. It was ten against one. The guard paid for the life of the prisoner he had killed, by a ten-year prison sentence.

PRISON ATTITUDES

Some of the prisoners were just plain lazy and had discovered a way to avoid any work assignments: they gambled away or sold all their clothes except their underwear. The camp authorities knew them and clothed them only when they were to be transferred. Whenever these characters had to go out they borrowed someone's coat.

At mealtimes, whatever the weather, we had to queue up along the prison wall, each with his earthenware bowl. We usually had to wait at least a half-hour, and many a fight broke out over one's place in line. It was not rare to see a bowl broken over someone's head before we reached the hatch through which the food was passed. This queue was happy-hunting ground for pickpockets, and we got into the habit of emptying our pockets before lining up. Men who worked outside did their best to augment their ration: some even robbed the horses of their oats, smuggling the grain into the compound where they patiently ground it between two stones, to make a sort of gruel. The most skillful at this

were the Asian Moslems, who were quite numerous. They were generally quite elderly. We saw them say their prayers at fixed times during the day. Some of their practices caused considerable ribaldry, especially their ritualistic washing of their posteriors, which they did each morning.

MY WORK

From the outset, I had the good fortune to be taken under the wing of a young man who had also done some drawings for the camp. From him I soon learned the points to exploit and the advantages which our “profession” could provide. Unfortunately we did not stay together long; he was sent to Dikson Island, in the Far North, for some offense which must have been serious. It was said that no one ever returned from this Arctic hell in ice, where in winter there are only two hours of daylight. It had been especially selected by the NKVD for men who gave trouble.

A few days after the departure of my friend, my name appeared on a list at the compound guard post, as one of the privileged ones who could work outside the compound without being guarded. For the first time since my arrest I went out alone, without dogs or machine guns behind



me. There was no barbed wire or watch-towers for me, and I could wander as far as the sentinels stationed on the roads about a mile from the camp. No one checked what I was doing. Of course the assigned work had to be done, under loose supervision, but I could breathe freely. My morale was greatly boosted. Now and then, I was given food where I worked, and did not have to return to the camp for the noon meal.

At first, my work was to decorate the walls of the barracks with designs and scenery. My friend had shown me spots where I could get yellow, white, red, and violet clays. My blacks came from the bakery chimney, and I got a very special green...from cow dung. This last material serves many purposes in the steppe: when it is dried it serves as fuel and when it is fresh and diluted it serves as floor dressing in the huts, which are coated with it weekly.

But the virus of “tapestries” was as severe at Artau as at Petropavlosk.

Both officers and civilians ordered them. I was given a well-heated, well-lighted room in the club as a studio. It was quite a contrast to my prison quarters where we rarely had a few branches to burn. The club was in charge of a woman prisoner, a cultured but sickly lady originally from Moscow. Besides organizing recreational concerts and directing rehearsals, she painted the slogans which were sent out to the various farms. At first I could see that she resented a stranger in her domain. I remained polite and tactful, and she became quite friendly.

My work often brought me to the school, the post-office, or to Administration offices. On my way there. I had to pass the mill, which was also run by a prisoner. I got to know him quite well and often stopped in to see him. He was a Russian, a soft-spoken man with a kind heart. Many less fortunate prisoners have reason to be grateful for his efforts to lighten their burdens in a variety of ways.

Shortly before the May holiday, I was instructed to decorate the elementary school: I was to paint a parachute on the wall with the inscription “May 1st.” Dangling from the parachute was to be a child heavily laden with packages, like a Santa Claus. Underneath, in very ornate letters, I was to write “Thank you, Comrade Stalin, for our happy childhood.” This formula was the morning and evening prayer of the tots. They were taught to pity the unhappy lot of children in capitalist

countries who did not have the advantage of the wise rule of Comrade Stalin, and did not have toys. In fact the toys at Artau were merely earthenware trinkets and *papiermache* dolls. I am told that older people, whose childhood days were over when the 1917 Revolution took place, used the slogan mentioned above, but rather maliciously.

At the post-office, I met a very sympathetic person, Maria Petrovna. She was a rather elderly lady who had been living in Leningrad during the Nazi siege. A bomb fell on her house, killing all the other members of her family. Miraculously, she escaped alive, but with her legs, arms, and ribs broken. She was more or less an invalid but had requested and obtained this quiet job in the depths of Kazakhstan. She was very graphic in describing the terrible scenes during the siege and spoke with deep feeling of the courage of the people in those dark days. After my departure from Artau, a friend sent me a postcard on which she had been kind enough to jot a few words of greeting. I had good friends at Artau, especially two that I remember.

MY FRIENDS

I met again Djurka, the tailor from Petropavlovsk, who had left there before I did and had been here ever since. He still worked as a tailor, and seemed genuinely pleased to see me again.

But without doubt my best friend was a Czech named Richard Novak. He had been commercial attache in the Czech legation in Riga in Lithuania. As soon as the Russians took over, he was arrested and sentenced to twenty years in the correctional labor camps. He had been confined in several places, including Chelyabinsk, south of the Urals, where there were 42,000 prisoners. He had married a Latvian girl in Riga, and had a brother who was manager of an Italian-Argentinian bank in Buenos Aires.

The Camp Commandant had been kind enough to lodge us together in the best cell. I had asked for him as my assistant. My request had been granted, and he too had been given permission to work outside the compound. Richard was cultured and quite talkative. Our temperaments and outlook on things were very similar.

He was like a brother to me, and even refused to open the parcels that his wife sent him, if I were not present and able to share. If it were not for the strength that Richard's friendship gave me, I would have found some pretext to avoid decorating the women's barracks, a job that took us three weeks. The language and the behavior of these unfortunate women was far more obscene than that of any of the men. I have no intention whatsoever of trying to describe their arguments, their fights, or the stories they told me. The main interest of many of them was to engage in monstrous and unnatural acts. Others, when the rumor went around that all mothers would be freed, easily found occasion to become pregnant.

In these surroundings were some women from the collective farm, whose only crime was to have stolen a kilo of wheat from the State. It was with great relief that we finished our work and were told that we had work to do for some civilian employees. These people often gave us breakfast or lunch, gave us small gifts, or presented us with factory-made cigarettes.

TOBACCO

Tobacco was grown in the camp, but all the best leaves were dried and sent out for sale. The stems were periodically given out, and for the prisoners this was a great event. We placed these stalks in a tall wooden jar. For hours, we chopped them and made *makhorka* which, as I have said, could only be smoked in a piece of newspaper. In the club I could get a lot of such paper.

TRAVELLERS' TALES

There was no lending library in Artau or Petropavlovsk and our only entertainment was talking and smoking. This, however was far from uninteresting. We were people who had passed through the hardest schools of life. Some had spent years everywhere in the immense USSR, first as free men and then as prisoners. Their experiences were not to be despised, and the agreement of their testimony, the repetition of the same details all told quite simply and with an undeniable note of sincerity were admissible bases of credibility.

We had pioneers from the Far North, miners from Djeskazkhan, men who had been camps in the Far East and Mongolia. Stories of the way of life and surroundings in these far-off places were different, but one single point united them: the same loss of liberty in the same Soviet atmosphere.

THE MAN FROM THE FROZEN NORTH

The carpenter was thin and wrinkled. In his mouth a few scattered and loose teeth revealed the ravages of scurvy, which had also bloated his legs horribly. After hearing his story, I was amazed that he was still alive. He had come back from Vorkuta, where I was destined to live from 1948 until 1954!

I learned that beyond the Arctic Circle and a bit west of the Urals, trappers had found veins of coal. Geologists had recognized its importance. Government ministers had decided to exploit it, and the Police had supplied the miners, by the tens of thousands. When cold, exhaustion, illness, or starvation transformed them into corpses, other prisoners replaced them.

Coal had been discovered in this region as early as 1898, but an official decree had declared that “no human being can survive there.” in 1940-1941, Vorkuta was only the name of a small northern stream, a tributary of the Pechora by way of the Usa River. It could be reached only by water, and that only in the short summer months. It was in this way that the first prisoners had been transported there. Near the river they had set up four wooden huts which housed a few civilians and some soldiers. The prisoners themselves lived in tents.

Most of the prisoners had been brought by train to the railhead at Pechora, some. 300 miles to the south. Orders from Moscow had been precise: Build a railroad to this new center of riches as quickly as possible, cost what it may. Gangs of prisoners were formed into mobile labor camps whose march north kept step with the building of new embankments and the laying of tracks, at the rate of two miles a day. Summer gave way to winter snows, but the fever of labor was maintained despite another fever which laid to rest, under the rails, large numbers of laborers. The labor supply seemed never-ending, for the police quotas kept pace with the ravages of death.

The carpenter had been working on these teams, and somehow had succeeded in not dying. It is true that he was Hungarian and everyone knows their capacity for endurance. He resisted bad food, superhuman fatigue, frozen bread, fierce cold that penetrated sweat-drenched garments, and sleeping in a tent, with only its canvas as protection from the snow and the biting winds of the tundra. Thousands died but he did not. He was one of the first to reach the accursed goal.

He worked on building the first huts in the first camps.

Sometimes, to spur them on to work, they were given a little liquor. But they got no tobacco. Even the soldiers got only a small ration. Some prisoners were so desperate for a smoke that they volunteered to saw and split timber (for fire wood) all night, in addition to their regular work,

just to get one or two cigarettes from the soldiers. From two cigarettes they contrived to make three. The third cigarette they sold for 3 or 4 bread rations. In those early days at Vorkuta, a match-box of tobacco cost 400 rubles. In 1950, it cost 15 rubles.

I was told by a prisoner from a neighboring barrack, who had been at Vorkuta two years later, that a man could be killed for his tobacco. He had himself robbed such a man. Conditions were harsh, the discipline was strict, and the “brigadiers” (prisoners in charge of workmen) were inhuman. They used to beat and even cripple the men in their groups. As the hospital attendants took no notice of the sick or the injured, men were dying like flies.

Our carpenter friend, completely worn out, his legs so swollen that he could no longer undress himself, collapsed one day from malnutrition, just as he was passing the guardhouse on his way to work. Soldiers carried him to the hospital from where he was later sent south. This was my first introduction to Vorkuta. Seven years later I learned a lot more about it.

THE MINERS OF DJEZKAZKHAN

Kazakhstan boasts of having more than 50% of the copper in the Soviet Union. But it says nothing about the conditions under which the copper is mined. The Djezkazkhan Basin, one of the richest sources of copper in the world, is in the very center of Kazakhstan, about 188 miles west of Artau. Most of the miners were prisoners, and their living conditions were atrocious. Our companion said that he would commit suicide rather than go back there.

The most demoralizing factor, he told us, was the knowledge that one is to die, quite soon, from the polluted water. And all the water in the region is badly polluted. One does not live long in the mines of Djezkazkhan; those who survive have total gastric and intestinal

disorder. Those who die there, and they are many, do so after terrible suffering.

I do not remember precisely the stories of those who returned from the Far East. It seems to me that life there did not differ significantly from our own, except that their work was mainly felling trees in the Siberian forests.

Men who had returned from the camp at Ulan Ude in Inner Mongolia gave us picturesque details of the customs of these still primitive people. One story I remember: it seems that when an old man reaches a certain age the members of the family hold a farewell party for him and then walk in procession with him up a mountain. There they push him into a ravine and troop solemnly back to their homes.

OTHER COMPANIONS

Alexei, the orderly in our hut, was a kind old man who, at one time, had been a colonel in the army of the Tsar. He had fled to Harbin in Manchuria but was arrested as soon as the Russians arrived in the town. Every day he went with his buckets to the well in front of the compound. He did all sorts of odd jobs around the camp. He was very pious and one could see his obvious distress when he heard the younger men blaspheme or mock his religious beliefs.

His attitude toward religion was shared by Tadjik, a prosperous Moslem. He came from a collective farm, on the border of Afghanistan, which specialized in the production of silk. It was interesting to hear this young man declare his enthusiasm and praise for the collective farm life in his village. So far, everything that I had heard about peasant life in the USSR had been bad and that the peasants were poor, miserable, and discontented.

One of the less interesting residents was an epileptic. He had been one of the abandoned children who, about 1920-21, had been one of the

plagues of Russia. He had spent a considerable time in a mental institution and told us of the incredible brutality that he had witnessed and suffered there. He had a most beautiful voice and we loved to hear him sing. His camp duties were rather vague; we heard that the Commandant employed him as a kind of bodyguard and as head of a sort of spy ring that kept him informed about what was done and said in the barracks. As a result, the epileptic was not too popular among the men.

For a few weeks, we had a Polish decorator who painted several murals during his stay. He had painted scenes from capitalist life: automobiles, luxurious bathrooms, and roads that were wider and better kept than any in Russia. This portrayal made him a threat to the Soviet presentation of the march toward happiness.

OKEANOS

Large-scale transfers were comparatively rare at this time, but occasionally a few new men came in and some old hands left. Around May, 1947, the convoy brought in a fellow whom the astute Commandant immediately singled out for preferential treatment: he was dispensed from all work and given all sorts of special privileges. He turned out to be a man known professionally as Okeanos and he was the manager of one of the largest circuses in the country, who had received the coveted title of "Artist of the Soviet Union."

He had been sentenced to ten years in the camps for not having fled into the interior at the time of the German advance.

In vain had he explained that, in the circumstances, the transportation of his animals had been impossible and that he had never put on a single performance for the invaders. He was judged guilty anyhow. His troupe still existed and was managed by his wife.

He was a very kind man, with distinguished manners. He continually astonished his hearers by his descriptions of the very

privileged life of Soviet artists. He owned a villa in the vicinity of Moscow and had money to burn. While he was in the camp, his wife sent him bulky packages of food at least twice a week. The Commandant got his "share." Twice his wife got permission to visit him, and she brought his magician's equipment. As a result, we enjoyed some very diverting entertainment, because he gave several performances in the club.

In spite of his predicament, he thought of his circus constantly and was always planning new numbers, the details of which he sent to his wife. I got to know him quite well because he often came and asked me to sketch his ideas. I never complained because he was very generous. Once, he had an extraordinary spectacle which required several drawings. His gratitude was expressed by a most useful present, two almost new shirts. For the past year I had had only one shirt, all that remained after the thieves had passed by. It was very much the worse for wear, and went into the disinfecting oven each time I had a bath. I never could wash it, because our 10 gram ration of soap did not even suffice for my personal cleanliness. So the shirt was rotted away with dirt and sweat. Had I made attempts to wash it, it probably would have simply disintegrated. Thanks to the generosity of Okeanos I was able to discard this faithful companion into the trashcan.

AN ESCAPE

One summer night, two prisoners made a break for freedom. They scaled the wall of the compound and picked their way through the barbed wire. The alarm was given, and guards on horseback, with dogs, set out in search. Around 10 a.m., they were sighted some miles away from the camp and were captured. Their captor ordered them to put up their hands and tramp back to the camp. Soon he became somewhat nervous, drew his revolver and shot one of them in the knee. He left him there, brought the other man in, and took a truck to fetch the wounded man. The

fugitives were tried and sentenced to several additional years of captivity.

Their escape was really absurd and foolhardy. The vast territory around the camp was dependent upon the camps and the local people had been promised all kinds of rewards for information about escapees: 50 rubles, 150 cartridges, 100 pounds of flour, 2 pounds of tea or sugar, and a supply of socks was usually too great a temptation to resist. Apart from that, the speech and racial characteristics of the escapees made tracking down prisoners a relatively easy affair.

Their crude attempt could hardly succeed when a very cleverly planned escape two years before had ended in failure. Three men and a woman had been involved. She worked in the office and had been able to provide false papers and a travel permit. They started off by going from camp to camp, presenting themselves as buyers for the camp. Their papers seemed in order and they were making good progress when the woman lost her nerve and wanted to surrender. So her companions murdered her. Then their luck seemed to run out. Their trail was picked up and two of them were arrested. The third man was eventually caught too, thousands of miles away from his point of departure.

A LITTLE BUREAUCRACY

Towards the end of the summer, the camp accountant informed me that my position was complicating his work. He had not foreseen a camp decorator. He told me that I must do the same work as the others or go to some other camp. His remarks made little difference to me because officers were still commissioning work. Something else led to my leaving Artau.

On October 17, I went to the guard-post as usual to announce that I was going out to work. The soldier on duty said that he had received orders that I was not to go out that day. Then, lowering his voice, he

went on confidentially, “As a matter of fact, we were told several days ago that you would be leaving the camp. You would be gone already but the officers want you to finish your work for them.”

Indeed, not long after, I was told to return the bed-cover and to proceed to the various offices for the usual formalities. Sadly I had to leave my friends. My departure was to be at noon on October 18.

CHAPTER TEN

DESTINATION UNKNOWN

AN ORDER FROM MOSCOW

“All the priests to the Arctic!” That was, in brief, the message from the NKVD center in Moscow, which was sent to all the camps where priests were prisoners. The Gulag administration must have thought that these vile enemies of the People were being too tenderly treated, by being allowed to live like common folk. It would do them good to be sent to a region “where even birds do not dwell.”

But as I left Artau I had not yet heard about this document or about its significance. “Maybe they’re going to free you,” said my friends. Sure, in five and a half years. Until then, I would have the time to be “re-educated.”

DEPARTURE

Into an almost empty bag, I packed the few rags of clothing I had been able to hold on to, a pair of socks knitted recently for me by one of the prisoners, and one of Okeanos’ shirts. I still had the overcoat the robbers had given me. Under it, I wore a magnificent vest of fur and white wool which Djurka had made for me. Then I clambered aboard a truck with three other fellows who had finished their sentences and were being set free. We had a sergeant for escort.

We reached Agadir in the evening. Although I hadn’t the slightest notion of where I was going, I was told that the train would leave only at 10:00. Until then we were free to roam around the bazaar in the main

square. We were able to buy some milk and a bit of bread. The other two men roamed freely, but the sergeant walked at my side while I looked around. We boarded a “civilian” train and sat among the ordinary passengers. We were even permitted to chat a bit with them.

Around 5:00 a.m., we arrived at Karabas and the camp I had known so well. It was still the same as in January, with perhaps a few less people, without snow, and without the “commandant.” It seems that “Indians” had caught up with him and murdered him. I stayed there only three days, but that was long enough to have my money and my books stolen.

They still had their black market, as I discovered to my loss. An old man with a long white beard and a benevolent appearance sidled up to me and from beneath his coat produced a brand new sweater. I asked him how much he wanted. His price was too high.

“How much can you give me?”

“Fifty rubles.”

“That’s enough.” And he handed me the sweater and disappeared into the crowd. I put my treasure under my coat, but our little transaction had not gone unnoticed. When we arrived at the barrack, the new “commandant” said to me. “I see that you bought something from the old man with the beard. That was a mistake. Open the bag and see what you paid for.”

To my dismay, I found that the bag held only some old rags. Then I remembered: the bag with the sweater had been under his left arm; this bag he had taken from under his right arm.

“Don’t feel too bad about it. You’re not the first guy he has swindled, and I doubt that you’ll be the last.”

I slept near a young man who had had an arm amputated. The next morning, while we were dressing, he asked for a cigarette. While I was thus distracted, his cohorts stole the boots that I had been holding on to,

so dearly, for so long. They were just an old pair of ski-boots which I had brought from Rumania. Well-worn, they were still very serviceable. Of course, no one around had seen anything, and listened without interest to my complaint.

I was barefoot when we were called to assembly in the muddy courtyard. Quite casually, a youngster of about 14 fell into step with me and whispered, "Have you lost your boots? For a ration of bread I think that I could find something for you to wear." He showed me an old pair of slippers. They were better than nothing. I had to take them at his price. What great equipment to begin a long journey! Why, after all my experience, had I been so naive?

PETROPAVLOSK AGAIN

When I left Karabas, I had a whole prison car all to myself. But not for long. At Akmolinsk, three children, about 12 or 13, were put in with me; and the first thing they did was ask for cigarettes. I was curious to know what crimes these kids had committed. So we sat and smoked, and each one told me his story.

One of them was an orphan who had been given a home by his grandmother. During her absence, he had gone to her little garden and picked some onions. I don't know whether he wanted to eat them or sell them, but some neighbor reported him to the Militia. He was sentenced to ten years in a camp for minors.

I don't know whether such camps are part of a Soviet plan for "re-education." The unfortunates who were sent there saw nothing but bad example; and, apparently, made it their ambition to outdo in rascality the scoundrels who were their camp-mates. My companions were obviously just beginners; they used vile language, but not very well. Before long, they would be as bad as the rest. A year ago, at Petropavlosk, a guard who had worked in a children's camp said to me, "These kids are

absolutely incorrigible. The only way to get anything out of them is to turn a deaf ear to their obscenities. Only the police-dogs can control them.”

A bit later, at Kokchetav, a group of men were put aboard. One of them, white bearded, told me that he was a Ukrainian Catholic priest. He had been offered his freedom after several years in the camps, on condition that he join the Orthodox Church. Now he was going back home.

The arrival at Petropavlosk was somewhat gloomy. It was raining, and we had before us a seven-mile trek along a road that was a muddy quagmire. At first we tried to walk in the driest spots; but, in our exhaustion, soon trudged through puddles and mud that was above our ankles. And all I had was slippers.

TWO WEEKS IN THE CAMP

I was recognized as soon as we arrived and several men greeted me warmly. Pivorarov was still there and he sent for me immediately, while the others were being checked in.

“Ah, Nicholas, you have come back to us. But you are a priest (his voice trailed away). Well, don’t worry. I shall keep you here for a few days, and you can freshen up the paintings in my office. And you can have your old room with the ‘permanents’.”

Nobody could have been kinder, and I thanked him sincerely. One evening, as I was finishing my work in his office, his secretary asked me whether I knew where I was going. I said no, and she whispered to me, “You still have a long way to go. They are sending you to Pechora, to Vorkuta.”

From what I had heard about the place from my carpenter friend, this information was less than pleasant. The storekeeper asked me for a portrait of a girl he knew. I profited from the occasion in order to get

from him a pair of new shoes, provided I put them on only when I was actually leaving the camp.

I wandered into the barracks to see my gallery of paintings. The picture of Jukov was gone, he having fallen in disgrace. Was it ever replaced by someone else's? Anyway, two weeks flew by, and I was again to face the unknown.

OMSK

We went to the railroad station by truck and there waited for the train. I was surprised to note that it was headed East. I was rather disturbed because I thought that we should go West. Of course it didn't matter much, but I did not like to think that my friend had deceived me.

As I was climbing into the train compartment, hands from above relieved me of my bag. A peremptory voice told me to follow it. "Oh, no! Not again!" I thought. Then I was advised to shed some clothes because it was very hot up there. The lovely vest that Djurka had made for me didn't stay with me long. Instead, I got a old one of rabbit-skin, which I forgot to put in my bag. Soon a guard made me enter another compartment. So I lost both my food and my rabbit-skin vest. When I complained, they said that I had some nerve. They needed it themselves. What a fine application of the Soviet proverb "*Tvoio, moio; a moio ne tvoio.*" (What's yours is mine; but what's mine is not yours.)

After about 150 miles, the train stopped at Omsk and a large group of men got off. Some vags maintain that the word Omsk is composed of the initial letters of a phrase meaning "special place of exile for prisoners." Or so it was in the days of the Tsars. Now prisoners go much further. We were again loaded in a truck. The city seemed very rich and beautiful. Situated on the banks of the Irtysh River, it manufactures agricultural implements, chemicals, and food products. The population numbered several hundred thousand.

We stopped before the prison which dated from the old regime and seemed very forbidding. The cells and corridors were of vaulted stone. The bars and doors were of iron, and the windows were tiny.

As we entered, we were searched as usual; and shoelaces, belts, etc. were confiscated. We were fingerprinted and ushered into an already crowded room where we squatted in what empty space we could find. This was typical of the “common” prisons where both ordinary criminals and political prisoners were thrown together. Near me, an argument was going on about a shirt. It seemed that one of the men had just traded some food for it and another man had come up and demanded that he hand it over. I don’t know how it ended, but one of them said, “You don’t come to prison to get dressed up. When you get out, go to the store and buy another shirt if you want.”

A bit later, we were told to get ready for a bath. The facilities here were no better than in other places I had been. Garments went into the disinfecting ovens, and when they came out were thrown in a heap. It was hard to get your own clothes back. The prison officials were so anxious to prevent all vermin that they subjected us to this procedure four times within a day and a half.

On the fourth day, trucks picked us up and brought us back to the station. This time the train went west. The traveling conditions were, as usual, uncomfortable: strict discipline, lack of food, thirst, promiscuity and overcrowding during more than 500 miles. But at least I was not bothered by thieves; I had nothing left to steal. Now and then, the train stopped. Some left and greater numbers got in. We were getting more and more uncomfortable. We passed through only one place worthy of mention: Tyumen, a city which, during the German advance, had had the privilege of sheltering the remains of Lenin. Finally we arrived at Sverdlovsk.

SVERDLOVSK

The camp, which had welcomed us in 1946, held for me no happy memories. I was considerably relieved to learn that political prisoners were completely segregated from the rest. I was put back in the cell where I had spent such miserable days before. But the atmosphere was completely changed. We slept fairly well on the bare boards. In the morning we were brought out to work. We were exhausted from the journey, and we left the cell without great enthusiasm. We were promised better food as a reward, but that hardly compensated for the cold, the snow and ice which in November are complete masters of the region.

Our work was carrying bricks to the third floor of a building which the NKVD was constructing for their offices. The inclined planks were slippery and dangerous, and I was too weak to carry many bricks. After three days they told me to stop hauling bricks and just keep the planks scraped clean of snow and ice.

In the morning and at noon, we were fed a thick soup of fish and oatmeal. It tasted horrible but there was plenty of it. This routine lasted about three weeks, after which only the skilled workmen were kept on. The others, including me, were sent on their way. Only one happy note was struck during this dismal stay at Sverdlovsk: the bells of a large church in a nearby, neglected cemetery, rang out often. Their sound was pure and musical in the crisp, clear air. It was so long since I had heard bells.

MOLOTOV, KIROV

The next stage of our journey was 500 miles long. We stopped for a long while at Molotov, the former town of Perm. Most of the people in our wagon were political prisoners, and this made the common law

prisoners, only two or three, rather loath to take liberties with such a large group.

After three days we reached Kirov, formerly known as Viatka. We were unloaded on a thick carpet of snow. As the camp was some distance away, up a very treacherous road, we were ordered to form up in rows of four and to walk arm in arm. The intolerable heat of the train was replaced by biting, icy air. With my new shoes, I was constantly slipping. If it had not been for the linked arms of my comrades, I would have fallen several times.

The transit prison was a group of wooden shacks on the top of a little hill, just outside the town. We were told that it had just been rebuilt after a fire. Even so, it already had its full quota of bugs. The bath session at Kirov was painful because we had to stand around, absolutely naked, for a half an hour, in a cold room where there were several vacant tubs but no water. Then a trickle of cold water flowed for a few minutes. Then the barbers had to shave us before we were allowed to dress again. These beauticians wore long hair, light slips, and brassieres. At Petropavlosk it had been just the opposite, but hardly more moral.

Apart from my stay in the reception room at Sverdlovsk, in 1946, I don't believe I have experienced more crowded conditions than in the cell at Kirov. Somehow I succeeded in bracing myself against a wall, worked my way down until my chin rested on my knees, and in this fashion spent the night. The only food we got was a very clear broth served in a type of wooden bowl that I had never seen before. The next morning, we were turned out into a small yard surrounded by a fence. We could move around freely and were allowed to talk. I soon noticed a group of five men who stood out from all the others. They wore beards, spoke Ukrainian, and called each other "Father." Like me, they must have been the object of the decree "All priests to the mines." After

listening to them discreetly for a while, I went over to them and said to them in Latin, "I too am a priest."

They invited me to sit down and one of them asked me all kinds of prudent and searching questions. He obviously knew the need for self-preservation against *agents provocateur*. He was right. One is never too cautious. My answers must have satisfied them that I was genuine. They invited me to share their abundant provisions. They had come directly from the Ukraine and thus had avoided the thieves in the camps.

We occupied the same compartment and were inseparable until the end of our journey. It certainly was not hard to stick together because we were crushed so tightly that it was impossible to move, almost impossible to breathe. All we could do was sweat. One of them was sick, but there was little we could do to make his journey more comfortable. Our daily ration was the eternal salt fish and three cups of water. But and large, it was the longest five days of my life.

Although we knew in general where we were headed, we had no idea when we would get there. The station at Kotlas, on the northern Dvina, marks the beginning of the territory specifically taken over for prison camps. Once we had passed that, we were continually alert for the order to get out.

All kinds of rumors flew. Some maintained that a large number of prisoners were actually engaged in preparatory work for a Trans-Siberian railroad, parallel to the existing one, but much further North. They said tunnels were already being dug through the Urals and that bridges were being built. The whole scheme was called the 501 Workyard. There, as a prisoner in 1939-41, had been Rokossovski, who was later pardoned and became a Marshal. It was also the scene of the revolts in 1947-48, when the prisoners liberated some camps. I had no basis for evaluating the truth of any of these statements, so I just listened and let them talk. The train kept traveling into the frozen North, past Ukta, Pechora, Inta... and

we got weaker and weaker. On December 17 and 18, I was seized with such terrible pains in my back that I could neither sit nor stand. It was impossible to lie down. I could have screamed with pain.

VORKUTA

Mercifully, at about 10:00 A.M., on the 18th, the train pulled into Vorkuta, the last station on the line, about 65 miles above the Arctic Circle. My journey had lasted exactly two months, from October 18 to December 18. Enroute, I had been in six camps: Karabas, Petropavlosk, Omsk, Sverdlovsk, Kirov, and now, at last, Vorkuta. The final stage of our trip had taken in 3,000 miles. After six days of train diet, we had reached the tundra in the depths of winter. With no strength and little physical resistance, we uneasily faced the future with nothing more than a determination to make the best of things.

Vorkuta, that morning, seemed to be just snow, watch-towers, and a cluster of wooden or brick buildings. We had left the train at a small station on the edge of the town, not far from the camp, which we came upon quite suddenly. The snow blurred the outline of the buildings and the few roofs we saw gave no impression of continuity. Actually, there were seven or eight structures which housed the offices, the store, the refectory, the kitchen, our quarters, and the baths.

We were taken first to the baths and then were given a meal. We could not believe our eyes when we received a huge hunk of bread (800 grams), a liter of soup, a large piece of fish, and a barley stew which was followed by a sourish oatmeal called *kissele*. I was too tired and too sick to take advantage of this abundance, and could eat only about half of what I got. My companions made short work of what I left.

After that, we were shown to our quarters through a door at the foot of a staircase of hard snow. Inside, two stoves gave off welcome heat, but we were not yet allowed a period of rest. A guard ordered us out to

get some coal. He gave us little sleds and accompanied us to the railroad, about 200 yards away, across snow banks piled up by the wind. When my sled was loaded, I found out that I couldn't pull it. The soft snow acted as a brake on the front of the sled. Without help from another prisoner, I don't think I could have got back to the barrack. As we walked along, he said to me, "I heard that you were a priest. I'm a Polish Jesuit."

Next day, the "common law" prisoners made us take turns cleaning up the hut, starting with the oldest ones. All the clothes we had, even personal items, were then registered as *kazionnie* i.e. belonging to the State. Those who did not already have them, including me, were issued *valinki*, big boots made of felt, not very stylish but certainly very warm. Then I went for a walk outside to take my first look at the mysterious tundra, and at the Ural mountains which raised their peaks about 50 miles to the West.

Our stay at the camp lasted only two days. On the morning of December 21, a long list was read, of those who were to go further. My priest friends and I were included. We gathered outside the door and began a short march of some two miles. We crossed the main street of the town on which there were the more important buildings, many of them wood. A sled passed us, attracting our attention, because the driver was dressed in furs, Eskimo fashion. Then we went down a steep slope and walked about a mile on the frozen Vorkuta River. I was so tired that I hardly noticed it. I was following the others mechanically in the laborious climb up the opposite bank. I arrived exhausted at the gate of the camp which, to me, seemed at the very end of the world.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE FAR NORTH, VORKUTA

CAMP #8

The end of the world, the end of a year, the polar night, and in four days it would be Christmas. Thanks to the vindictive NKVD decree against priests, we would be eight priests celebrating the feast in our barrack, quarantined like all new-comers. We would remember the One who came to bring salvation, love, joy, and peace. Unforgettable feast, at the outset of a period full of suffering, if only from the climate where the annual average temperature hovered around minus 7 to 11 degrees centigrade.

It was now two and a half years since I had said Mass; two years since I had been separated from Father Leoni. Since then, I had really had no opportunity to really converse with a fellow priest. I had been shunted from pillar to post, from Moscow to within 400 miles from the Chinese border. Never for a moment had I ever been alone. Among my companions I had found many fine fellows, but the atmosphere had always been far from priestly. It had not been easy merely to remain myself. One had to want to continue to live. Yet in the camps one often heard that prisoners no longer lived, they just existed.

Now, after two years of moral isolation, without outside help, without a confrere, Christmas in the Far North gave me the joy of sharing, understanding, helping, loving. There was an even greater joy because the Jesuit succeeded, how I do not know, in celebrating a secret Mass in a corner. He consecrated a host for each of us, that he then

distributed to each clandestinely. What unexpected joy! Our joy was indeed great. We thanked God for that wonderful Christmas.

THE FIRST PURGA

Winter! And the wind howled. It was the *purqa*, the blizzard which mingled drifts of snowflakes to the piles already on the ground. We had nights 17 hours long, with that pale light where dawn and dusk meet. That, we were told, was Vorkuta. And the thermometer registered minus 40 degrees centigrade. After our supper, two guards entered. "Get up. Get to work."

Where? in such weather? We followed them into the darkness, amid the cold, the wind, and the snow. We could barely make out the silhouette of the fellow ahead of us. We sank into the snow up to our knees.

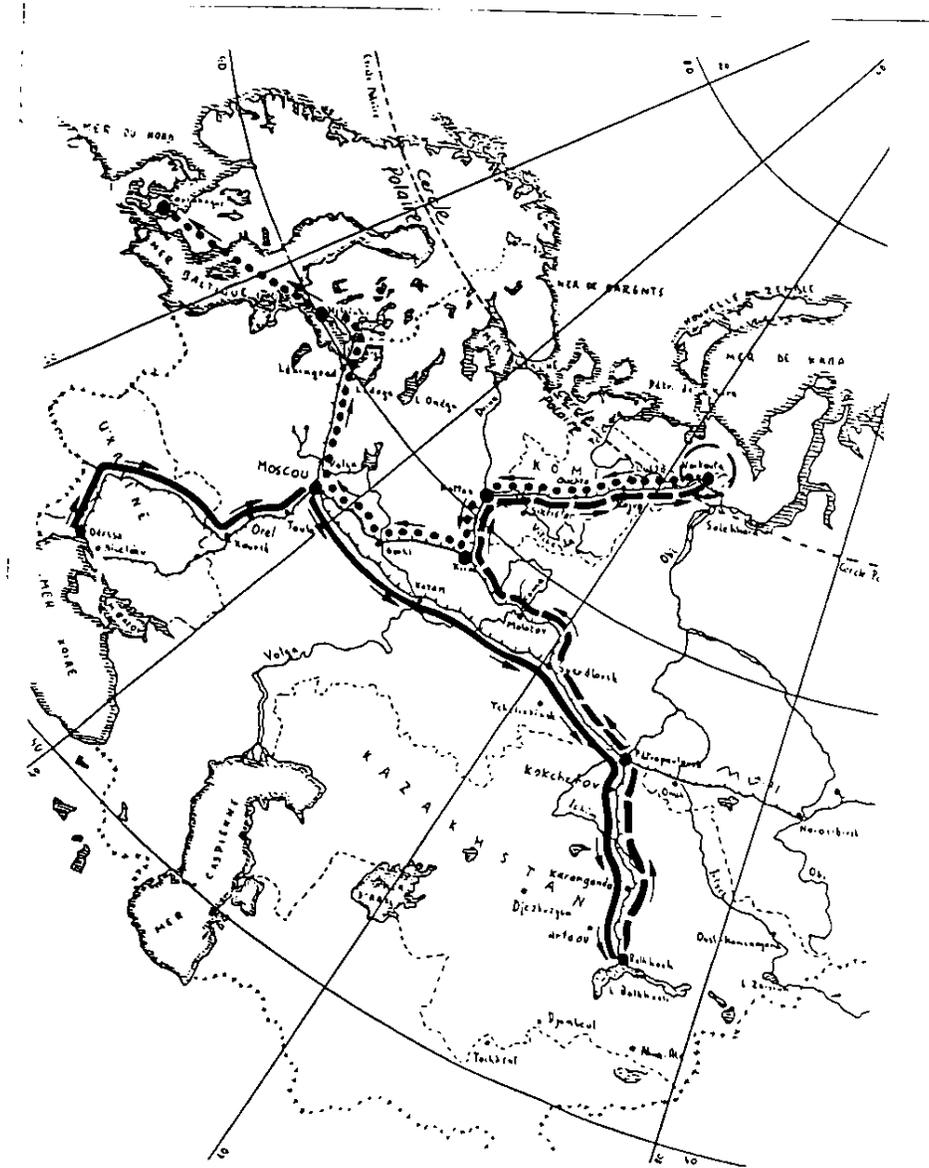
As soon as we got out of the warm barrack, frost formed on my glasses and I had to remove them. We were given wooden snow-shovels and left the camp. We were brought to the railroad station, and there we had to shovel until 2:00 a.m. to free the tracks of snow. The coal trains bound for Leningrad had to go by at any cost.

QUARANTINE

New arrivals were always isolated, for a varying length of time, in a special barrack. During this period, they had no opportunity to make contact with other residents of the camp. As yet, they belonged to no regular work-brigade and were employed on various fatigue duties as need arose. Some members of our group were ill and, as a result, our quarantine lasted until January 11, almost three weeks. Then we had to undergo quite a long medical examination to determine the category of work for which each man was suitable. I was classified as "medium,"

THE FAR NORTH, VORKUTA

which meant that I was disqualified from work in the mine but I could work aboveground.



Solid line: Fr. Nicolas' odyssey from Odessa to Vorkuta

Dotted line: Return journey

Then we were given a course of instruction, called "Tech minimum," which was a brief introduction to the organization of the mine, the machinery, and the kind of work. Safety was stressed. On the very day of our arrival sixteen men were killed because of a gas explosion. Even men who were temporarily unfit for work had to follow this "Tech minimum" course which lasted about two weeks and which was followed by an exam.

To reach the classroom, we had to cross the entire camp, up to the top of a little hill. It was absolutely forbidden to enter any barrack or even to speak to another prisoner. After class, we were often drafted for snow or coal fatigues. This last was a dreadful experience, because it involved loading coal dust, even in the face of violent wind which drove the dust into our eyes and down our throats. We would return to the barrack black and unrecognizable, and would try to wash ourselves with snow. There was no soap.

Yet others were even worse off. Some of our companions came back from the limestone works in another camp. They described it as Hell. Burned by limestone, toiling amid unhealthy dust, they had to endure the cruelty of the overseers, who struck and often maimed them with iron bars. Among the men themselves, it was the law of the jungle. The stronger oppressed the weaker, especially where food was concerned. As a result, the mortality rate was very high. All these things made us fear and made us realize our misery.

MINE NUMBER 8

Three days after the end of our instructions, we were brought on a tour of the mines. One of the overseers brought us to the entrance to the pit, and we descended several hundred steps to a gallery. There was a terrific draft blown down by machines on the surface. We watched the different processes in the extraction of the coal, the shoring up of

galleries, the drilling of holes for explosives, and the removal of coal by conveyor belts or by the little tip-trucks pushed by men or drawn by horses.

We went even lower and came to a section closed off by boards. That's where the explosion had occurred. We were then 1500 feet underground.

On the return journey, much to our pleasure, the overseer let us ride the conveyor belt. This was of course strictly forbidden as too dangerous, because there was between the belt and the arched roof only a couple of feet of space. And the passengers were in total darkness. At one moment we had to jump off quite smartly and jump onto another belt. But we had no problems. Then we had to climb endless ladders to the surface. We were told that experienced miners ran up these in a few minutes. I don't know whether that was true, but I do know that several of us had to stop many times to recover our breath. Our excursion had lasted three and a half hours.

The mine, called Number 8 in the register, is, in fact, the first one worked at Vorkuta, and it has little machinery. The coal seams are at an angle of 35 degrees. Their thickness varies from about two feet to over nine feet. The abundance of the coal makes up for its poor quality.

Practically speaking, the working of the upper seams of coal had almost reached the register boundary of the next mine, #40. At this time, number 40 had yielded no coal, but in a few years it became the richest in the coal-field. Apart from the awkward angle of the coal seams, all these mines shared another disadvantage: the high incidence of gas.

MEETING FATHER LEONI AGAIN

I was unaware that my co-worker in Odessa, Father Leoni, had arrived in Vorkuta three weeks before me, along with three other priests. One of these worked in the office and reported my arrival to him. Father

Leoni slipped in among the ranks of the “Tech minimum” pupils and sat on a bench near me. At first I did not recognize him, and my companions teased me about it, asking if I was too high and mighty to acknowledge my colleague.

The next time, I examined him more attentively, and still had trouble recognizing him. He was dressed in rags, his face was drawn and he looked considerably older. His beard had been shaved off and he was without his eyeglasses. I imagine my own appearance must have given him the same kind of shock. I was just as thin and my clothing was just as grimy as his. These sad facts did nothing to diminish our delight at seeing each other again and swapping tales of our misadventures.

His story was tragic enough. After leaving Moscow on January 1, 1946, he had been sent to a camp about 200 miles away. There he was given an apparently privileged job in the bread store. It was a trap. The “prisoner” in charge of the store was a disguised Soviet officer and his helper was a Pole, who was an agent provocateur and stool-pigeon. Father, in his naiveté as a new prisoner, was simple enough to speak his mind on occasion. He was approached by a Moslem from the Caucasus who started to speak to him about religion, pretended to be interested in Christianity and finally asked Father to baptize him.

Every word Father spoke was passed on to Headquarters and very soon he was facing new charges of introducing religion into the camp. He was placed in a punishment cell on a starvation diet. After a new trial he was sentenced. His previous sentence, of which he had already served two years, was replaced by a twenty-five year sentence, starting from the day of his new sentencing. Like us, he had been sent to Vorkuta, but didn't seem to be much concerned about his future. “It doesn't matter how many years they give me,” he said. “I shall remain here just as long as, and no longer than, the Good Lord wills.”

We were together at Vorkuta from January until October. His work and situation were worse than mine. He was assigned to pick coal and had to live in a dirty barrack amid very uncouth companions. Days flew by and after several visits to our barrack by many officials we foresaw an end to our quarantine.

BUYERS

Several prisoners, better dressed than most of us, wearing fur hats, began to come more frequently to our barrack. Note book in hand, they started to question each of us about our specialty. We called them “buyers.” As heads of various mine departments, they were seeking to strengthen their staffs. No mine work appealed to me and I was hoping to find something more in line with my artistic tastes. Finally I said to one of the “buyers”: “I can paint, sketch, and draw plans. Do you have use for any of these?”

“Well, yes,” he replied. “Just give me your name and I will sign you up.” I found out later that he was head of the GUEREU, the Department of Geological Research. This sounded interesting, even if, at the moment, I knew nothing about what work would be expected of me. I was considerably relieved to know that I would not have to work in the mine.

THE GUEREU

On January 11 we were released from quarantine and made to follow our new bosses. Each brigade had its own barrack, and each one could differ greatly from another. Our barrack was atop a hill, and was large, bright, and very clean. Three brigades, 300 men, were lodged there. I was very disappointed when I found myself assigned to a brigade of carpenters. The man who had wanted me was very apologetic but said

he could do nothing about it at the moment. The police had insisted that, because I was a priest, and therefore not trustworthy, I must first prove myself by working as an ordinary laborer for three months- If, at the end of that period, they were satisfied, I would be allowed to work in the office. Meanwhile, I had to be patient.

There were consolations: the GUEREU chose its personnel well and treated them accordingly, provided they did their work well. The work of the GUEREU was of prime importance. Its center was in the village, where the free personnel lived: directors, engineers, geologists, chemists, and specialists of all kinds. In general, everything of geological interest fell within their purview; but the main purpose of their presence in the Far North was to search for coalfields and mineral deposits, especially in the Urals. Actually, they were investigating the whole western basin of the Pechora, right up to the Arctic Ocean. Already, forty coal deposits had been discovered, less than half of which had as yet been worked. Still, teams of drillers were being sent out into the whole tundra. These prospectors were organized and directed by the scientists, especially during the summer months. In winter, the findings of all this research were analyzed.

Of course the prisoners had nothing to do with the specialized work of the GUEREU, but the camps provided the laborers for the preparatory work. We were responsible for some of the office work and for whatever carpentry work was required.

LARGESSE

At the first opportunity, we were taken to the GUEREU store outside the camp, near the river. It was pitch dark and I slipped on the steep slope and lost sight of my companions. I wandered around, hopelessly lost, but was lucky enough to meet someone who gave me directions. I arrived just in time for the distribution of mattresses,

blankets, sheets, pillows, and towels. Each man received also two shirts and two pairs of underwear. Many, many months had passed since I had handled such treasures; and that night for the first time since I had left the Lubyanka I slept on a sheet.

The next day we left camp in a group, without guards, and reported to the carpentry shop. Really, it was a collection of large shops in which were made the pre-fabricated houses for the workers in the tundra. It overlooked the river, across from which loomed the bulk of the generating plant, dominated by huge chimneys. This plant was the real heart of Vorkuta, making it possible for men to live and work there. It was the only source of power and light for the entire region, and a nearby mine was especially reserved to keep it supplied with fuel.

A railroad track brought building materials right into our workshops. Almost every day, often during the night, wagon-loads of logs and planks arrived and had to be unloaded as soon as possible. Whatever the weather, every man had to leave his own work and lend a hand. It was tricky and dangerous work because the wood was often covered with snow and ice. Because of my inexperience, I found the labor particularly hazardous and on a couple of occasions narrowly missed being crushed between two logs. As a rule however, my work consisted in clearing away the piled-up planks, and removing the waste and sawdust from near the giant circular saws. The sawdust was piled into a huge box on a sled, and I had to push this over heaps of snow to the dump, about 100 yards away.

It was taxing and exhausting work, but somehow I managed to fill my quota and our foreman, a Latvian, was able to send in reports that allowed all of us to receive the maximum food allowance, Menu #3. This consisted of a kilo of bread, a midday soup, a meat-ball, cabbage, and a dessert. On Sundays and days of rest, we got menu #2, with 800 grams of bread, fish instead of meat, and no dessert. In spite of my goodwill,

buoyed up by the hope of a better job in three months, my strength gave out, and the day came when I could hardly climb the hill to our hut. I went to the doctor, who, as soon as he saw me, sent me to the hospital.

A WELCOME RESPITE

I had bronchitis, and stayed in the hospital for sixteen days. Undoubtedly the main cause was the fatigue induced by the lengthy, comfortless travel. My work in the carpentry shop did nothing to help me, even with the advantages provided by the GUEREU. The doctor, also a prisoner, went around twice a day, prescribing a series of tonic injections. These, with rest, better food, and silence, soon restored my health.

The health services here were far better than anything I had experienced in the other places where I had been. There were special sections for consultations, surgery, tubercular care, and general medicine. There was equipment for special treatments, and there was an X-ray department. But this latter was outside the camp, as it had to serve free workers also.

When I was back on my feet, I was given two free days, but I did not appreciate them too much, because I was concerned about my status in the GUEREU. When a prisoner leaves the hospital, he does not necessarily return to his old assignment.

MARKING TIME

My fears proved groundless and I went back to the GUEREU, but without my initial cheerfulness. An icy wind blew over Vorkuta and working outside was very unpleasant. True, we were occasionally allowed indoors to warm up, but we could not over-indulge, because the quota of work had to be filled. There was the depressing thought that we

were only in mid-March. I had no watch, but by the position of the sun, I had calculated the end of the work-day as 3:00 P.M.. But I had forgotten that at this latitude there is a daily discrepancy of four minutes. My three months of probation seemed unconscionably long.

Two or three times, we were called back to the camp soon after we had begun work. I learned that whenever the temperature slid below 36 degrees centigrade work was halted and the administration sent in a report justifying the suspension. From then on, I became interested in temperature.

AN OFFICE JOB

On April 11, exactly three months after release from quarantine, the GUEREU agent came to me at work and told me to follow him. Without uttering a word, he led me through the village until we reached a barrack. He told me to enter. "From now on, you work here," he said.

In the first room, I met a woman secretary and a civilian who introduced himself as Adrian Mikhailovich. He brought me down a corridor and introduced me to a man who was, apparently, director of the Guereu. He looked up from his work and motioned me to be seated. After observing, to no one in particular, that "there are people who claim to do about almost anything but are often only gifted with the ability to talk." And he began to question me very carefully.

As soon as I had mentioned that I had studied at Louvain, in Belgium, his manner changed completely. He too had studied there and was in a position to ascertain whether I was genuine or not. My answers soon convinced him, and I was assigned to work under Adrian Mikhailovich.

Short and almost bald, his voice gentle and calm, with a constantly wrinkled brow, with eyes that had a faraway look, my new boss seemed completely dedicated to his work.

He greeted me and, a propos of nothing, he remarked, "I had a prisoner working for me before. He served his sentence and was set free. His successor was so dishonest that I had to fire him." Next he looked me over from head to toe and said, "If you work here, you must get rid of that dirty and worn woolen vest. Take this coupon and get a new one at the store." He was starting to please me.

Then he began to explain our work. A whole wall of his office was covered with shelves containing a lot of dust and a heterogeneous collection of stones. "These are specimens brought from various drillings. I have not had the time to sort or catalog them. You can start on that. Some of the more interesting items will have to be sketched. You will also make an abstract of some chemical analyses and note down certain characteristics according to rules which I will give you."

He sat down and resumed his own work. The work he had assigned surely was more to my taste than pushing sled-loads of sawdust. I started to work immediately. The next day, the woman secretary was transferred to another office and I took over her desk. I remained very happily with Adrian Mikhailovich until October, 1948, when the position of political prisoners was radically changed.

SERVICE AND SELF-SERVICE

When I changed work, I had to change brigade and thus change barrack. I was moved from barrack #2 to barrack #54, which was at the bottom of the hill, right next to the guard post and the camp punishment cell. There were less than thirty men in my new quarters, all of them people with education. Manual laborers were jealous of them because they were better dressed, could leave the camp without supervision, and had work that was easy and pleasant. We had almost unlimited contact with civilians. Although we were not allowed in the village stores, we could get all kinds of things, through the civilians.

Our barrack had a kind of janitor who did the cleaning, kept the fire burning, and occasionally spared us the trouble of going down to the dining hall, by bringing up our meals. A tiny galley sometimes allowed us to cook additional foods for ourselves. The janitor was not particularly overworked, as he could always get a lot of help. Outside volunteers came in to help because they knew that we had food left over, which they could have. Other volunteers were the miners, who smuggled in coal from the mine. I do not know how they did it, for they were always searched.

On Sundays, when we could quite easily get out of camp under the pretext of work, we had the offices to ourselves because the civilians were at home. Some of us read books, others played chess, and I usually did a bit of sketching. A few of the men even dared to visit their co-workers who lived in the village. I was myself often invited to tag along to do portraits. This assured an excellent meal and some money, considerations which, in our eyes, more than compensated for the risk of being seen, arrested, and even punished by some officer of the guard.

These visits were always very pleasant, and occasionally exciting. The oldest man of our group, a former teacher, was inclined to drown his sorrows in vodka. Often our hearts were in our mouths as we approached the guard-post. We could help him until then, but at that moment he was on his own. In some mysterious way, no matter how bad his condition, he managed to stay erect for the critical few moments in front of the guards.

ESKIMOS AND REINDEER

On one of these Sunday excursions, I saw for the first time reindeer hitched to a sled. They were standing next to the free store, a team of six to each of two sleds. They were about as tall as a calf, and still had their their multi-pronged antlers, which they shed in Spring and grow again in

Autumn. Their hooves were neat and dainty. I could well believe the claim that, in the tundra, they can reach speeds of almost fifty miles an hour. They were waiting for their masters, who were getting supplies, especially of vodka. These men staggered from the store, flopped down in their vehicles, took up the long rod with which they guide their animals, and headed north to where their families awaited them, in their tents of skins.

These nomad tribes eat raw meat and fish, even when they come to town to sell their wares. Later on, when I was free but still in Russia, I bought a pair of reindeer-skin boots, beautifully embroidered, fur-lined, and wonderfully warm. They also make satchels and handbags, for which they find a ready market. The meat which they sell is usually butchered on the spot.

The government has organized them into collectives. What this means is that a check is made of the number of animals they own. They are then taxed accordingly. Very few of them speak Russian and they do not mix with other peoples. An autonomous region has been set up for them on the edge of the Arctic Ocean, and its capital, Naryan-Mar, stands at the mouth of the Pechora River. In our village they owned two buildings: one, the store where they bought their provisions; and the other, where they did their drinking.

SLAVE LABOR

One day, as we were getting ready to go back to camp, I saw my first group of prisoners condemned to hard labor. I could very well have done without the experience. I believe that I have never seen such pitiful wrecks of humanity anywhere. There must have been about forty of them, huddled together, guarded by armed soldiers and dogs. They stood there, dressed in rags, their backs bent, heads buried in their shoulders and hands behind them. They wore cloth caps with earmuffs, but these

were not fur-lined. On the front and back of their jackets and on the left leg of their pants were painted large numbers. They wore the *burki*, cloth boots protected from the snow by some kind of rubberized sandal and tied with string. I thought that they never need worry about being robbed by thieves.

It is of these that Molotov once said to the French Minister that “they have lost all civic rights and have only a number to identify them. Only the head of the camp knows the identity behind the number. I am powerless to do anything for the man in whom you are Interested, unless you can tell me his number.”

This remark was made at the time of an attempt at intervention on my behalf. I had been incorrectly represented as having been sentenced to hard labor. Actually I had been merely sent away for a time to a re-educational labor camp.

Many foreign nationals are detained in the camps. They had been prisoners of war, or deported by the Germans into districts later occupied by the Russians, or had been picked up in various countries under the standard accusation of “espionage.” When requests were made for the release of such men, the standard reply came back that there had been no foreign prisoners in Russia for several years. That is true because the thousands of foreigners still detained were classified by the Soviets as war criminals or spies.

HIS WORDS...TO THE ENDS OF THE WORLD

Adrian Mikhailovich’s duties often took him to the library to consult his colleagues, and to the chemistry lab. As a result, I was often alone, and after a few weeks in his office, I decided that the time had come for me to resume celebrating Mass.

This had suddenly become much more feasible than at any time in the past three years. My camp colleagues received parcels with a few

altar breads and a few raisins from which they made a little wine. When I mentioned my plan to them, they willingly shared their resources with me, and one of them gave me a clean altar linen. A Polish workman in the plant had made each of us an aluminum box which could serve as a chalice, and its cover used as a paten. Already before my arrest, I had learnt the text of the Mass by heart, and one of my priest friends had managed to conceal a tiny missal from which I copied additional prayers.

I shall never forget my first venture, which took place in the early part of May, 1948. I arranged my meager equipment in the bottom of my desk drawer, which I left partly open. I sat down at my desk, pencil in hand, and softly began to utter "Prayers at the foot of the altar." There, as if in a modern catacomb, I pronounced the words which summoned the Great God to become really and truly present in the northernmost reaches of that huge empire which rejects Him so violently, but of which He remains the Master, despite what men might do.



But my joy and my emotions are my own and I shall not attempt to describe them. From that day forward, almost every day, I contrived to say Mass in the morning. It was not always easy. The circumstances of a prisoner's life change quickly and without warning. Often the office door opened, forcing me to close my drawer quickly and, like a delinquent schoolboy, pretend to be busy at my drawing. One visitor came in when I was in the middle of Mass and stayed talking for more than an hour, insisting that I smoke a couple of cigarettes with him. Yet never did anybody who was not supposed to know discover my secret.

Later, when I was transferred to mine #7, I did not go out on Sundays and often said Mass under my bedclothes while my companions were noisily playing dominos, singing, or merely arguing. Once I celebrated Mass in my suitcase, pretending to arrange my belongings. But by far the safest place was the *kipialtilka*, which supplied the camp with hot water and which was in the charge of two Ukrainian priests.

The other priests in camp employed similar stratagems and said Mass when and where they could. One of them, a miner, had made a cavity in a deserted gallery in the mine. There he put down his lamp and consecrated the Host with hands that were as black as the coal he worked with.

The ways of Divine Providence are strange, and I have often marveled at the irony of the situation which the Party, by its intolerant attitude toward ministers of religion, had brought about. Because of their decrees, their camps, and their mines, priests who had been torn away from their churches, their country, and their people, were now carrying to the ends of the earth the Mystery of God living with us.

The heralds of materialism and irreligion had merely ensured that the Supreme Sacrifice would be offered in regions where, but for their vindictiveness, Mass might never have been said. Uppermost in the minds of all us priests was the intention that they might come to realize

that merely material progress would not give to men the complete happiness they crave, that man does not live by bread alone, no matter how thickly it is buttered. Some day true freedom would be restored to people who have been bewitched or enslaved.

Now that I have returned to normal life, I must confess to an occasional nostalgia for those Masses in the Far North, so simple in their secrecy, so devoid of all external ceremony, but so enrapturing, and, dare I hope, so rich in pledge of salvation for the wayward, the ignorant, and the persecuted. Lord, forgive them for they know not what they do!

SUMMER IN THE TUNDRA

In June, the days are so long that there is no night. The sun remains above the horizon even at midnight. Bit by bit, the snow disappears, leaving in its place an indescribable mud. Planks are laid out everywhere, along the roads and in the camps. They are absolutely necessary.

July brings in the short northern summer when the desperately white tundra turns to green. A few days of warmth call forth little flowers of the most delicate forms and hues, which at dawn contain small frozen dewdrops which glitter and sparkle on the petals. The most characteristic beauty of the North, however, is the rich spectrum of the skies. One never tires of gazing at them, and it is impossible to recreate their splendor for one who has never seen them.

In spite of the warm days, it is impossible to cultivate the open land. Only some miles further south can "Chinese cabbage" and a hardy type of potato survive and grow. Hot-houses allow tomatoes and cucumbers to grow, but these are not available to prisoners unless they dare steal them.

One can count on the fingers of one hand the few days hot enough to go around without a coat. By August 15, autumn has already begun.

Cool weather and rain announce the start of winter's undisputed sway for the next eight months.

Adrian Miokhailovich's wife, the principal of the school, inaugurates the summer by bringing the school children to visit the GUEREU museum. Installed in a nearby barrack, it is an interesting local museum, the most important exhibit being the large skeleton of a mammoth discovered locally. It also has a curious collection of XV and XVI century jewelry for armor and harnesses, discovered here and there under mounds on the tundra.

In the camps, barracks are repaired and whitewashed. Oats grow in the fields, but they will never mature. It's summer, but always remains the Far North.

SCURVY

Prisoners, deprived as they are of vitamins, are prone to scurvy, which first attacks the gums. I had already fallen victim and the roots of several teeth had been exposed. In a very short time, like over-ripe fruit, they had fallen out. Camp dental service was not so well organized as other medical departments. In any case, the miners had priority and so many of them needed attention that it was almost impossible for a non-miner to be treated.

At the time I was engaged on a very interesting job. In the course of the drillings, at a depth of some 550 yards, the petrified body of some sort of scorpion had been discovered. Mikhailovich was almost ecstatic and immediately began a report to Moscow. I was asked to make several sketches of the scorpion. Just then I began to experience considerable pain in my thigh. It could not be a scorpion ... I had scurvy again. This time, it took the form of a large, angry-looking boil. As a result I was unable to work for three weeks. Even when I returned, I limped for a month and a half. As far as teeth were concerned, I later lost all of them.

HIGHWAY ROBBERY

My enforced rest gave me an opportunity to catch up on some reading and visit my fellow-priests. I helped the janitor with some lighter chores. One day he asked me to help him bring back our food ration. We collected the rations and were on the point of leaving when a man stepped into the doorway, blocking my passage. Somebody else reached over and snatched my glasses and ran away.

I put my buckets of soup on the ground, told the janitor to look after them, and took off after the thief. I chased him round and round several barracks and then lost sight of him. As I was standing helplessly looking here and there, an old man sidled up to me and said casually, "He is hiding behind the dining-room door." I was just as surprised as was the thief when I found him there.

"I want my glasses back," I said.

"First, you must pay me for them," was the cool rejoinder.

"Why should I pay you for what is my own property?" I spluttered. "Anyway, I have no money."

"You had better find some. Otherwise I will break them and not give them back."

By this time a crowd had gathered around us, but one look at their unfriendly faces told me that I could not expect any help from anyone. Reluctantly I began to finger the twenty rubles I had in my pocket. All the money I had in the world. "Well, how much do you want?" I asked.

"Twenty rubles," he said, as if he could see into my pocket.

"I'll give you ten."

He was most uncompromising. "Twenty rubles or I smash the glasses."

I thought at first that he would snatch my money without returning my precious glasses. He seemed to read my thoughts and put the glasses

in the palm of a buddy to whom I was to give the money. This fellow, at first, tried to keep the glasses, but the first crook was honest enough to insist on the swap.

From then on, I became ultra-cautious whenever I saw one of these petty thieves anywhere near me. I'd put my glasses in my pocket or make a detour to avoid meeting them. This attitude precipitated an accident, insignificant in itself, but almost tragic in a prison camp. My workmates had asked me to go to barrack #2, to draw our monthly ration of sugar. We were then getting 888 grams per month. I had an armful or paper bags with the precious sugar, when I saw a young man hurrying towards me. I panicked, tried to turn and run-- I had fears for the sugar as well as for my glasses—and fell flat on the slippery ground. To my dismay, some of the bags burst, scattering their contents in the mud. I did not know how to face my friends. Yet, as often happens, when I appeared before them, muddy and disconsolate, they were so generous and kind about the whole affair that my guilt feelings deepened.

FISHING

One morning, violent sounds of protest began in our barrack. One of us had discovered that his clothes, which he had hung on a nail at the foot of his bed, were all gone. He thought it was a prank and asked the prankster to return them.

The truth lay elsewhere. Someone had taken advantage of the lingering light of the May night to remove quietly a pane of glass, held only by four glazing points. A stick with a hook on it had lifted the clothes off the hanger, piece by piece. By this time they had been sold in some other barrack. Afterwards, we kept the inside shutters locked.

NOCTURNAL RAIDS

This precaution was no guarantee against night raids. Soon after the episode I just mentioned, we were all asleep, with shutters closed and the door locked. Only the watchman, who slept a few hours during the day, was awake. About 1:00 A.M., there was a knock at the door. "Open up, I'm bringing you some coal."

The guard was used to these nocturnal visits and opened up right away. He got a hard punch to the stomach, which sent him flying. Seven men, armed with long knives and pieces of iron, swept into the room. One stayed on guard at the door. Another stood over the poor watchman and made him sit in a corner of the little kitchen. As we stared at each other in amazement, some of us reached out our hands to seize objects to hurl at our assailants. But the leader, brandishing a large butcher knife, yelled that the first one who moved would be gutted. "Lie down and shut up. We won't take your clothes, but we need money and food."

Three of them started the search. They took all the money they could find, as well as some parcels that had recently arrived. As I had neither money nor packages, for once I lost nothing to robbers. "Now if you value your skins, nobody will leave here for an hour," they said.

Once they'd left, there was bedlam in the barrack. The last threat was obviously a bluff, because it was in their interest to disappear as soon as possible. After ten minutes, two of us raced to the guard-post to raise the alarm. The soldiers had no doubts about the identity of the robbers and went straight to the punishment cell, where, the day before, they had locked up a band of notorious criminals. Through the peep-hole, they saw the bandits regaling themselves on our food. When the soldiers tried to open the door, the bandits cried out, "Leave us alone for an hour or there will be bloodshed." And they showed their weapons. The soldiers went to consult their officers, who ordered them to attack the cell. This having been accomplished, we were able to reconstruct the crime. The bandits had made a hole in the ceiling, pierced the roof, cut

the barbed wire, and made for the closest barrack, ours. It was harder to discover how they had obtained their weapons, but in the camps nobody is really surprised at what a roan can conceal.

Naturally, the break-in was the main subject of conversation among the prisoners. A soldier told us that the bandits had begun to argue among themselves and that two of them had died in the squabble. I took advantage of the incident to do a bit of teasing on my own account, because, since the theft of my glasses, I had been teased a lot.

GANG WAR

If I have dwelt at some length on these Incidents, it is because such episodes were a prominent feature of life in the camps, and because my last days in Camp #8 were marked by events too important to be left unmentioned

There were two kinds of common-law prisoners. The first were the *blatnyi*, case hardened criminals who lived by the code of the underworld. They were professionals who considered themselves bound by the “ethics” of their profession. One of their cardinal principles was an absolute refusal to do any work or to collaborate with the authorities, no matter how advantageous that might be.

Then there were the *suki*. One might have a grudging respect for the *blatnyi*, but for the *suki* there was nothing but contempt. Some of these were former *blatnyi* who had modified their former ideals, but others seemed to be “naturals.” There was no crime too mean or contemptible for them, and they were ready to betray anyone for even the smallest material gain. They were eager to ingratiate themselves with the authorities and were despised accordingly.

They could never be seen doing productive work. They held all the soft jobs in the camps: they were in charge of the kitchens, the stores, the barber-shops, and the baths. They acted as messengers for the offices and

they were the brigadiers whose duty it was to make the other prisoners work. The police exploited all their weaknesses; and when they became tiresome or useless, fabricated accusations against them, threw them in punishment cells, and transferred them to some other camp.

Between the two groups, latent warfare existed, which sometimes erupted, especially if a transport of prisoners threatened the balance of power. This happened in Camp #8 one evening. A regular pitched battle broke out in a neighboring barrack. Guards sent for reinforcements and waded in. Before order could be restored, within a few minutes, eleven were killed and many were wounded.

While the wounded were being brought to the hospital, a man armed with an axe and hotly pursued by a policeman, dashed over to a stretcher and battered its occupant to death. During the night, another bandit broke a window of the hospital, entered the ward and shot two men as they lay in bed. The camp was in turmoil and the cells were filled. The bandits vowed revenge, and the following Sunday nine more men were slain.

MY FIRST PARCEL

One morning, one of the Ukrainian priests among us told us that the people who sent him parcels from the Ukraine were ready to send some to another priest who received no packages. "I have given them your name," he said to me, "so don't be surprised if you are summoned to the office to claim a parcel. You will be asked for the name and address of the sender and why he is corresponding with you. Simply say that they are friends." And he handed me a slip of paper with a name and address.

A while later, I did receive a parcel with foodstuffs and materials required to say Mass. I am deeply grateful to these distant and unknown friends who during five years kept up their charitable work. Almost every month I received food and clothes. This was of great help to me during the strict regime that followed my transfer. My only regret was

that I never was able to write and thank them adequately. I was allowed to write to them only twice a year. But I pray for them every day.

GOODBYE TO CAMP #8

Rumors, more or less vague, spread for some time, that there was to be a big change in the administration of the camps. In October, 1948, rumors became reality. Political prisoners were to be separated from other prisoners. Privately I gave three cheers. It was the best reform Moscow could have instituted.

Six hundred “politicals” were given one hour to get ready for the road. The next day, my name was among 800 others who were also to leave. Assembly, roll call, march to the station and boarding of boxcars, all went speedily. The convoy went north. Before leaving, I had been barely able to see Father Leoni who wasn't leaving because he was in the hospital with a fractured shoulder. One hour's travel brought us to Camp #7, in the village of Oktiabrski. This was my last move as a prisoner. Four and a half years later I would leave Oktiabrski as a free man.

CHAPTER TWELVE

CAMP #7 – THE RETCHLAG

At Camp #7, we were to replace the convicts who had previously manned the camp. Most were already gone but a few remained with us for a few days. To be quite fair, I must admit that they bore little resemblance to the group I had seen at the GUEREU camp. Apart from the number which they all wore, there was nothing to distinguish them from the rest of us. We shared the same living conditions but soon discovered that their work was harder and the discipline much stricter than in Camp #8. We could no longer go out without guards; the small monthly allowances were suppressed; but we no longer had to rub shoulders with thieves, assassins, and bandits.

Of course there were still criminals among us. To be classified as a political prisoner under Article 58, it was sufficient that a man be a saboteur, a counter-revolutionary, or refuse to work. Then there were the “traitors,” who, during the war, had allowed themselves to be captured by the Germans rather than commit suicide, as basic Soviet ethics demanded. In such a motley bunch there were bound to be some common-law criminals. But they were few. In Camp #8, more than half of the 7,000 prisoners had been common-law offenders.

MORE PICTURES...THANK GOD

A new camp, new organization. One had to start over from scratch. Assembled in a field, we were sorted and assigned to various brigades. The strongest men or the specialists in mining or carpentry had already been chosen. The rest of us were split up among two or three brigades.

We were the unskilled labor force who would take care of the heavier tasks. Obviously, I was not particularly excited at this prospect. The looks of the barrack we were to live in did nothing to cheer me. Our instructions were to get ready to report for work in an hour. I am in for it this time, I thought.

Just then, a man entered the barrack. "Which of you is the artist?" he asked. I stepped forward. "Follow me," said the man, "I have work for you."

"You can't do this," protested the foreman. "I've already inscribed him, and he has drawn his bread ration."

"Well, have him give it back," said the first man. "I need him. I will send you another guy to take his place."

It was perfectly timed, because moments later assembly was called. A work-organizer came up to me and asked what I was waiting for. "Where am I supposed to go?" I asked.

"To the mine, of course."

This did not make much sense to me, but there was nothing I could do. To my great relief, the man who had commandeered me was waiting for me at the gate and took me away with his own group. He was a sort of comptroller for the camp and was in charge of various workshops, shoemaking, sewing, tailoring, and the canteen. His motive in signing me up was not exactly disinterested: He wanted me to paint pictures which he could sell for his own profit. I did not mind too much; it was better than shoveling or pushing a wheelbarrow.

One day, however, the mine director came in to inspect our workroom. "Who is this for?" he asked, pointing to a painting I was working on.

"I don't know. My boss simply told me to do it and I'm doing it."

"Well, I'm the one you have to work for," said the manager. "Can you make me a picture?" Here we go again, I thought to myself. But

inwardly I was blessing this craze for pictures. It was almost a disease. After the picture, the manager wanted a portrait of himself and of his wife. It looked as if I were in business again.

THE DEPARTMENT OF CULTURE

For three months, I went every day to the mine to do my daubing, but I still found time to strike up a few friendships in the camp itself. I discovered another Frenchman in the health services. He introduced me to an elderly man whom the *KAVETCH*, the Department of Culture, had appointed to manage a badly needed renovation of the camp. He signed me up with his group.

I am deeply indebted to my French friend for another favor. When he was repatriated towards the end of 1953, he went to the French authorities and told them where I was and what I was doing. As a result of this information, they were able to open negotiations which ended in my liberation.

The first benefit derived from my change of work was that I no longer had to walk the mile to the mine each day. We stayed within the camp. It would be tedious to speak of all the decoration we did around camp and all the slogans we had to paint. But the strong personality of my new boss does deserve a few words.

He was a Jew named Tikhvinski, and at one time had been an official of the Ministry of Education and had specialized in the organization of holidays in Moscow and elsewhere. Still a convinced Marxist despite his condemnation, he devoted his talents to transforming the exterior of the camp and the interiors of the barracks. He was shrewd and not altogether disinterested. He always contrived to do work which would bring some material advantage (more food, for example) to himself and the men who worked for him. Finally, he had the knack of being able to get the maximum of effort and goodwill from us.

On some points, however, especially anything remotely connected with religion, I found his outlook very distressing. For him, as the organizer of parades and festivals, he admitted with grudging administration that nobody could present pageantry like the officials...in the Vatican! For him, Judas Iscariot was the most competent and the most intelligent of the Apostles; his business acumen and success had aroused the jealousy of the other, incompetent, Apostles. So they plotted against him and betrayed him.

The Jew's ten-year sentence was to end in 1951, but he always had the feeling that he would never be released. His fears were well founded. Just before the end of his sentence, he was put in a punishment cell and was sent to Camp #9-10, where I saw him later. His imprisonment was extended another ten years. He was so upset that he died a few days later.

I JOIN THE BUILDING DEPARTMENT

A "House of Culture" was to be built in the center of the village, where the free people lived. The plans called for some architectural embellishments and I was approached by officials of the Building Department to see whether I would accept the assignment. The work promised to be more interesting and more stable than the work which I was doing in the camp. I agreed to go down to the Building Department and look over the plans. There was very little original about them: they provided for an auditorium, two meeting-halls, and two lobbies, a facade and peristyle with some classic motifs and Soviet emblems.

I agreed to do the work, provided I had as assistant a young Latvian sculptor who had studied at the Riga School of Fine Arts. He had just arrived in the camp and was delighted to find work in his own field. Thus began a relationship that lasted until my liberation.

AN ARCHITECT IS UPSET

The ornamental poverty of the plan submitted by the Central Office of Architecture disappointed both of us. We mentioned it to the Superintendent of Works, an engineer who was free now, but who had had a taste of life in the camps for five years. He was a Jew, very intelligent and competent, unafraid of responsibility, and an absolute treasure house of imaginative ingenuity. His own experience as a prisoner had made him very sympathetic toward prisoners, for whom he purchased cigarettes, with his own money. He assured us that he had complete confidence in us and would back up any alterations we saw fit to make.

Encouraged by his support, I increased the ornamental work to about ten times its initial amount, made up motifs, cut out silhouettes and passed them to my assistant who modeled them in plaster. Ian Ianovich Butchinke was a fine artist and his work was remarkably forceful and clean. After that, both of us made molds which, with the help of other men who had been assigned to us, we reproduced in the required quantity.

Alexandr Alexandrovich was very pleased with our efforts and urged us to continue our adaptations. One day, however, the architect who had produced the original plans showed up at the office. When he saw the liberties we had taken with his work, he was furious, and Alexandr Alexandrovich bore the brunt of his anger.

“How dare you, on your own initiative, undertake such a work without notifying me! From now on, adhere strictly to the plans I gave you!”

When he'd gone, we looked anxiously at the Superintendent. He smiled and made one of those peculiarly Russian gestures that baffle translation. “Just continue as you're doing. Let him scream all he wants to. Your work will speak for itself.”

He was quite right. A few weeks later, the architect stopped by again and had to admit that the changes we had made were an improvement. “Still, from now on adhere to my plans.”

This remark was interpreted as had been the first one. As a result, the bare sunken panels of the ceiling were highly decorated, the large frieze under the cornice and the capitals of the columns were completely changed. The arches of the loggia were done in bas-relief. But the most striking change was the stage proscenium, which had originally been designed to have a narrow classic molding. When we had finished, it was almost over-decorated with panels, acanthus leaves and other designs.

When the architect returned for the third time, he gave us carte-blanche for the interior decoration, but insisted that the capitals atop the nine-yard-high columns were not to be changed. Magnanimously, we agreed. As artists, we were pleased with our work; but we were even more pleased that, in this Soviet system where everything is officially planned and foreseen, we had been able to claim a victory for poor prisoners.

August 5, the day appointed for the dedication, found the work finished. Workers from the Building Department filled the auditorium, and civilians occupied the boxes. Military and civil authorities from Vorkuta and elsewhere were present. There were a play and a concert. Reports were read and speeches were made. A colonel from Moscow remarked that one would have to travel very far south before finding such a fine auditorium. Three workmen, including myself, received official commendation and the fact was noted in our dossier. A petition was sent to the GULAG (Administration of the Camps) asking for a reduction of our sentences by one year. Of course, this proposal was never acknowledged.

A photographer took pictures that appeared in *Ogoniok*, a national illustrated magazine. We managed to obtain a copy of the article. Here's

a summary: “In the Far North, at Vorkuta in the village of Octiabrski, young KOMSOMOLS (Communist Youth) driven only by their patriotic fervor and their devotion to the ideals of Lenin, built with their own hands a cultural center which is a thing of beauty. Their work is an example for all KOMSOMOLS of our Soviet Fatherland. Thanks to them and to their work, may the victorious march of Communism advance, under the wise leadership of Comrade Stalin.”

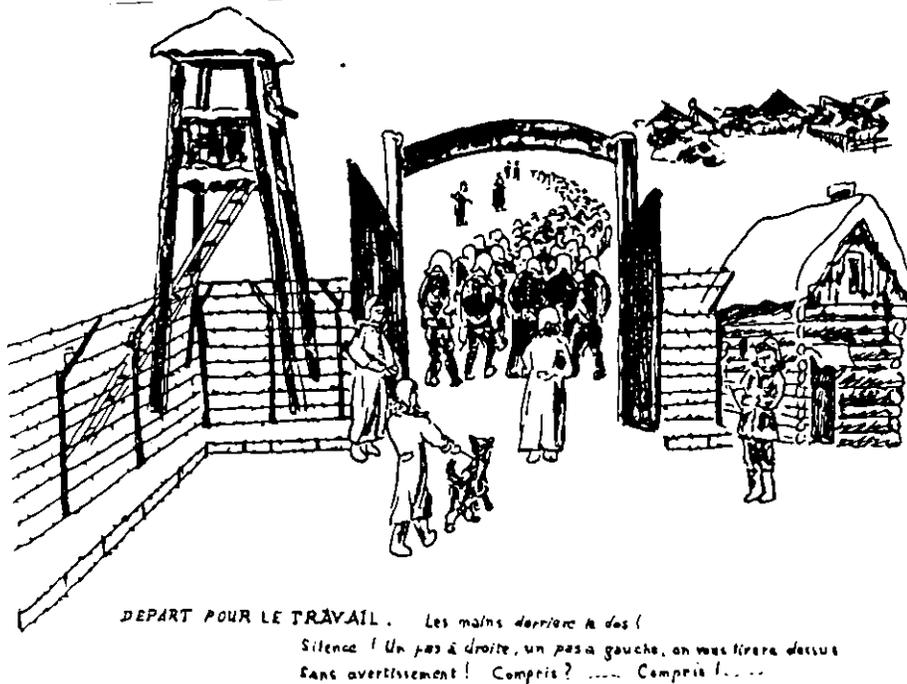
We were disgusted, because, except for some electrical work done by free workmen from the village, every brick had been laid and every nail driven by a prisoner. Our workyard, surrounded by barbed wire and watchtowers, had never been marked by even one KOMSOMOL footprint. I could see how such a distortion of facts must be part of the official propaganda.

A PRISONER’S DAY

Here’s how these so-called KOMSOMOLS lived. Four thousand of us lived in sixty barracks, in an area about 150 yards long and 90 yards wide. Some buildings were reserved for administrative offices and general services; the rest were shared by miners, builders, and camp workers. The two first groups worked outside the compound and were summoned by a bugle call to the guard post about one hour before their departure for work.

We were searched; then we lined up in rows of five and the camp guards, who wore blue epaulets, counted us once, twice, three times, and, on occasions, four times. Then the numbers were handed to other guards, with red epaulets, who escorted us to work. Machine guns in hand and holding dogs on a leash, they brought us to the gate, where we were counted once again.

Then came the solemn warning, which we heard twice a day, for years: "Hands behind your backs. No talking. One step out of line, left or right, and we shoot without warning. Understood?" And we had to answer "Understood."



Some of the guards, apparently just to be obnoxious, would make us link arms as we walked. In this fashion we trudged through the mud or the snow until we got to the work area. Then there would be another long wait while some guards climbed the watchtowers and others inspected the scene of operations. In winter, which lasted eight months, this could be very trying.

Work began at 7:00 A.M., so we had to have breakfast before 6:00 A.M. The dining hall was always crowded and we usually had to wait 30 to 45 minutes before being served. Before all this, we had to wash and stand in line for our bread, which meant that we had to get up by 4:30 at the latest.

The day's work ended at 4:00 P.M. There followed the same ritual as in the morning: long waits, searches, and, of course, the solemn

warning. As soon as we entered the gates, there was a rush to the dining hall for the main meal of the day. After that we were free to chat, go to the library, or play dominos or chess. At ten day intervals, we could take a bath. We could also go to the club to read *Pravda* or a local paper. Once a month, there was a play/concert at the House of Culture.

An added diversion was the periodic invasion of our barracks by the guards, who, under the pretext of searching for contra band such as knives, would turn everything upside down and confiscate anything that took their fancy. We called them “fly-killers,” and the Chief Guard was known as “Uncle Shit.”

The night roll-call at 9 P.M. was another source of amusement. The guard who had that duty could count only up to ten. After that, to keep tally of the “tens,” he had to count on his fingers. His talents were confined to barracks where there were no more than fifty men, so that the fingers of one hand would suffice. After roll-call we could lie down. Lights-out was sounded at 10:00.

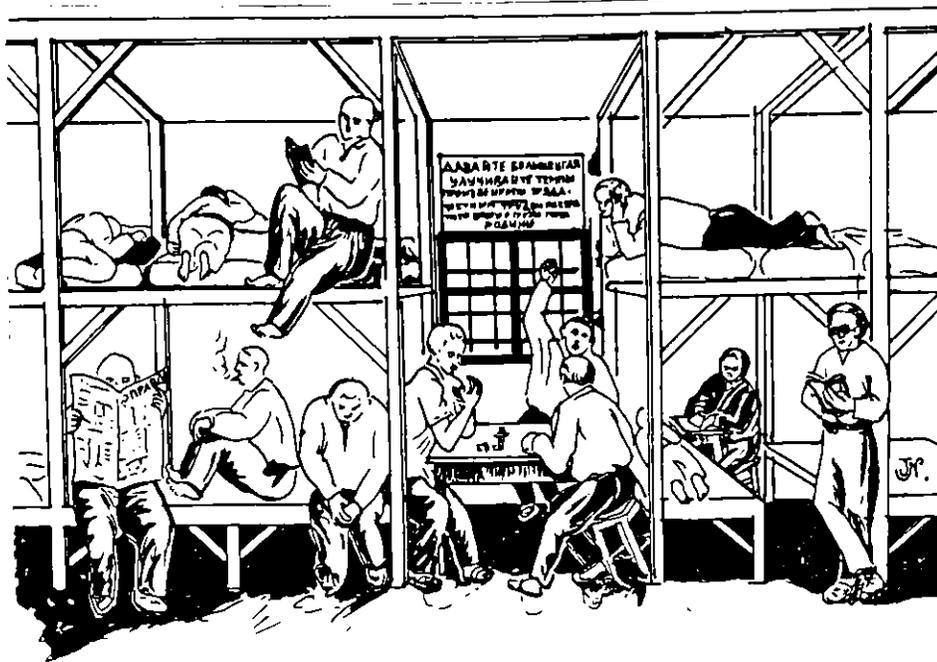
Four days a month were set aside for rest, and we, in the Building Department, usually took these on Sundays. The miners had no option. Work in the mine never stopped. There were three eight-hour shifts, seven days a week. Work was suspended one day a month so that the machines could be serviced and the day and night shifts switched. Miners had their days of rest in rotation.

RE-EDUCATION

The Cultural and Re-educational Department controlled every aspect of our lives except our work. In conjunction with the Health Department, it supervised the hygienic conditions of our barracks and common-rooms. It ran the library, which was well stocked with Russian literature, both classical and Soviet. The most interesting books were almost

always reserved for a small circle of favorites who were in a position to help the librarian.

In addition, there was a team of cultural agents who visited the barracks to chat with residents, deliver mail, receive complaints or recommendations (usually ignored). They had to make sure that there were plenty of slogans everywhere. The burden of these was: “Work harder.” One was addressed to the miners: “Give more coal to your country. Speed up production. By honest toil, you can compensate for the crime you have committed against the Fatherland.”



Other contributions to our re-education was a humorous newspaper called *The Wasp*, and a series of caricatures, generally well done, posted near the assembly point. Both newspaper and cartoons picked up various incidents, made witty and amusing remarks about them, and were good vehicles (from the official point of view) for pillorying careless or lazy workers.

At the club there was a large hall where, every evening, there would rehearsals of music, songs, athletic numbers, and sketches for the

monthly concert. These meetings were well prepared, were well attended, even though they inevitably contained some kind of Marxist doctrine. It was the same for the monthly movie. But the meetings were crowded, sometimes so much that the doors were literally pulled from their hinges. To satisfy everyone, repeat performances were given. The officers took advantage of the situation to comment, in a slanted way, on the international situation.

On important occasions, various groups of workers gathered to study production figures, the qualities or faults of the group, improvements that could be made, along with criticism or self-criticism. Every worker had a right to give his opinion, even on the bosses, without fear of reprisal. For a moment, it was an ideal soviet. Naturally, there were the usual exhortations to increase production, and honor rolls were set up with the names of those with the best records. Sometimes a pack of tobacco worth about ten cents, was awarded to the mining heroes who had sweated blood to achieve their quotas.

In the rare times when we were allowed a small wage, the authorities went so far as to appeal to us, enemies of the People, to contribute our few coins to equip Soviet soldiers and airmen who were defending the country and peace against the machinations of capitalist warmongers, financed by America. They saw no inconsistency in such a request.

SECRET WORK

In addition to my official work, I also had to try to cope with a flood of private commissions. One of my friends said to me one day, “You must try to paint on wood an icon of the Blessed Mother that someone has asked me for. I can’t tell you who. It’s a secret.” I was very pleased to be of service to him. In a few days, in a hidden spot behind some boilers, I was able to finish the picture. Later I found that it had been

made for one of the guards, a captain, whose uncle, an Orthodox bishop, had died at the outset of the Revolution.

Not all my clients had the same preoccupations. Another officer wanted me to make some pornographic drawings. I claimed that I could not, because of fatigue and too many previous requests. Among my clients were many who wanted tattoos, the favorite being an eagle with outstretched wings and holding a woman in its talons. I was asked to draw the bird on paper and then they would go on from there. Once I had to make the whole tattoo myself for a man to whom I owed many favors. He wanted the head of an Indian on his back. He instructed me on the use of various tattooing needles as I went along.

IN THE PUNISHMENT CELL

While I was working in the House of Culture, the chief guard came over and asked me for an enlargement of a picture of his mother. Ian Ianovich and I collaborated on it. We were already busy on a plaster statue, commissioned by somebody whose name I forget. But we promised to do the portrait as soon as we finished the statue. We had scarcely started on the picture when one of the informers, who were everywhere in our midst, came into the workshop to light his cigarette. He saw what we were doing and promptly rushed off to squeal. The next day, a major came to investigate, and we were given ten days in the punishment cell. We were not even slightly disturbed by his threat to have us sent back to hard labor, because by this time we were almost indispensable to the Building department.

I was in the punishment cell on two other occasions, but only for two hours: once for being at the door of the cinema before the end of the roll-call, and once for not having saluted a sergeant who had come into our barrack without my noticing him.

THE SCHOOL

After we had finished the House of Culture in August, our barbed wire and watchtowers were moved to another section of the village, where a middle-school was to be built. Again we were to decorate it, beyond the planned specifications. This time, our architect friend left us complete freedom, but charged the Superintendent of Works to make up any over-cost by economizing elsewhere.

We decorated the facade with bas-reliefs of writers and scholars, and the pediment held busts of Lenin and Stalin. Two relief globes decorated the portico. The ceiling of the main hall, 200 square meters, was ornamented too. Again, our work was approved by the authorities, who asked us to start thinking about decoration of a public bath, to be built in the near future.

AN S.O.S.—DEPARTURE FOR MINE #9-10

We had to pay a price for our success. In the beginning of November, we were warned that there was a “special order” sending us to Vorkuta to report for work decorating a huge and luxurious food-store. A “special order” gave us special status: we could be employed only on the work for which we had been requested, or else be returned to our original camp.

I left Camp #7 with my inseparable Ian Ianovich, the Latvian sculptor. To us was added Ludwig Wolke, a German chemical engineer who had acquired quite a reputation with the Building Department. While Ian and I used to prepare models and molds, Ludwig directed the rest of the work. He had a knack for drawing from ordinary materials all sorts of interesting shapes. The bosses valued his “improvisations.” His Russian was picturesque, and his nose was so large that he was nicknamed “Noss” (Schnoz).

We arrived at Vorkuta on a bitterly cold night, to find ourselves faced with a five-mile walk to our temporary residence at Camp *n* 9-10. We were issued clean linen and blankets and were shown into a very good barrack. After several days, at our request, we got a fourth man, whose work we knew and liked. We had to work fast because the store was supposed to open on the first of January. In fact it opened only in February.

We soon discovered that the Camp was manned by convicts and that the rules were much stricter than in Camp #7. Some of the miners worked in mine #9, and others, in neighboring mine #10. Many prisoners worked at building, in two or three locations in town.

AT WORK

Reveille was at 4:00 A.M., and we had to walk almost three miles before starting work at 7:00. The ruts left in the snow by the trucks were hard to navigate through. We had no day of rest and work was never suspended because of the cold. It mattered little to the authorities that violent wind and a temperature of 45 degrees below zero centigrade froze our noses and left blinding little icicles on our eyelids. Besides, I was bothered by toothaches caused by scurvy. But we had to rush the work and the foremen kept crying out "Produce. Faster."

Our immediate concern was to produce the capitals, beautiful but intricate, for the pilasters of the store. A local team, from a camp that was not yet under the Strict Discipline, had begun the work and we shared it. And at the outset we sensed a certain tension. They were paid just as we used to be, and our arrival was a threat to their income. The resentment soon wore off, and they would bring us cigarettes or candy that they bought in their camp store. A store in a camp! We were thunderstruck! We had never seen such a thing or even heard about it.

When the time came to place the capitals, we set about it conscientiously, properly, but the foreman soon shook us up.

“You have to speed things up, even if it means botching the work”

I assured you that the work was botched. I went into the store after my liberation, looked at the ceiling and was amazed that the decorations were still in place.

At the workplace one day, I was approached by a German who spoke perfect French. He would have liked to chat awhile. But my self-defense mechanism took over and I was quite cool towards him and found a pretext to move away. In fact, he was not an *agent-provocateur*. But I was obsessed with the idea of being prudent.

CHRISTMAS 1950

The authorities decreed that Christmas was to be an ordinary workday. Men were tired, nerves were frayed, and we were determined to do no work on that day. I grabbed a shovel and ambled from one end of the yard to the other, trying to avoid the foremen. There happened to be a number of power failures that stopped work. The day before, the authorities had suspected that something like this would happen, because they had told the doctors that no more than 20 men could report sick. Despite their efforts, no work was done on Christmas.

Every day was not a holiday, and the prisoners had done good work in building 25 large houses in the city during one year. The city had grown since I had first seen it in 1947. The workshops became more numerous. Near our store, a one-hundred-room hotel was being built, along with a restaurant. A bit further on a bathing establishment was under construction.

BACK TO MINE #7

Ludwig Walcha had been having so much trouble with his legs that he could not walk in the snow the six miles to and from work. He used to get a ride on a sled. The only consolation the rest of us got was that our special guard would let us walk along at our own pace. Finally, our work on the store ended and we were kept in the camp. The camp authorities wanted to put us on regular work but we claimed our rights and requested return to Camp #7, where there was plenty of work for us. The Camp Commandant agreed, provided we did a few fatigue duties first. So in early February, 1951 we went back to Camp #7.

We left Camp #9-10 with relief. We knew no one there and had always felt like outsiders. The cramped space, the mediocre food, none of these attracted us. Still I met there another countryman, Roger Marquet. Because our work hours clashed we could chat together only infrequently. I also met another Latvian priest, thanks to whom I was able to celebrate Mass several times.

THE BATHS

After our two-month absence, we now had to finish our work on the baths. The establishment itself was as good as that for the civilians, but it lacked decoration. The baths were large and clean and free from the disorder that we had found in other places. We undressed in one room and our clothes to be cleaned were hung on numbered hooks. Our shoes went into a locker bearing the same number. Two or three barbers were available to shave us or cut our hair. After the bath, we found our clean clothes awaiting us. Twice a year, we were issued new underwear. We went to the baths every ten days, barrack by barrack according to a posted schedule.

HYGIENE

At regular intervals, the bed planks from each barrack were taken out and washed in boiling water. The bedding was thoroughly aired and shaken. The huts were scrubbed, disinfected, and white-washed. This was part of a campaign which gradually eliminated almost all bedbugs from the camp.

Near the entrance to each barrack was a tiny room which was always over-heated. We workers used to hang our wet clothes on spikes driven into the wall, so that they'd be dry for the next day. Over the stove was a sort of lattice work where we'd put our felt boots to dry. The stove was also used to heat up the food we'd get in our packages. Drying footwear and food cooking mingled their smells into something indescribable. All year round, our janitor kept a covered pot on the stove. He claimed that it held coffee, but actually it was only water colored by burnt barley. One day, a miner remarked that the "coffee" had much more taste. Others agreed with him and congratulated the janitor. He was pleased but puzzled, and discovered the reason later when he cleaned out his pan. One of the felt boots had fallen into it and given the "coffee" its greater tang.

THE FOOD

The main complaint about our food was its monotony, sometimes aggravated by its insufficiency. When we worked for the GUEREU, we always had enough; but when we first went to Camp #7, we thought we were being starved. It was by no means rare to see some poor unfortunate fellows going around the dining hall in the hope of finding a few spoonfuls of soup that someone had left in his plate.

About 1950, there was a slight improvement. There was no increase in rations, but there was greater care in using the provisions. If the prisoners had regularly received the whole ration foreseen, the lack of real nourishment would have been felt less. But there were so many

selfish middle-men, parasites, thieves, and careless people that a good part of our food never got to us. This was true especially for fats and sugar, but also for flour, potatoes, and oatmeal.

For example, we were entitled to 20 grams of fat and 26 grams of sugar per day. Only the oatmeal mush we had at noon had any fat, and that was only about half the prescribed weight. We got our sugar ration once a month. But it had been stored over water, and the additional humidity meant a windfall for the store clerks.

The potatoes remained outside under ice and snow all winter. They became as hard as rocks, and when served to us they were so sweetish and tasteless that we had to throw most of them away. Our basic food was cabbage soup, served seven or eight months of the year without any variation. During the other months, we had a soup made from oats or hulled barley. Then we received a piece of fish or “meatballs” which were mostly bread crumbs, and 200 grams of porridge which was usually oatmeal. Two meals like this were served at 6:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. We had a daily ration of 700 grams of dark bread and a sliver (70 grams) of white bread. This last was supposed to be part of the evening meal, but as it was distributed at noon, it rarely lasted that long.

Until 1952, there were three official menus, depending on heaviness of one's work. Except for the miners, almost no one got the third type of menu. Workers for whom the administration received no payment usually got only the first menu. We in the Building Department got the second type of menu. There really was no great difference among these menus; but in the camps every additional mouthful was important.

After March, 1952, the whole system was revised. The bread ration was increased to 800 grams, we received a small wage, and the store and restaurant were opened. This largely destroyed our obsession with food, but there was a great deal of waste. We didn't eat everything that was doled out; and the horses, oxen, and hogs grew fat on our leavings.

Prisoners in 1954 told me that at that time bread was simply put on the table and each man took what he wanted.

I must note that there was a “special menu” of soup and bread for the men in the punishment cells who had not fulfilled 66 % of their work norm. Sometimes the norms were not met because of a lack of materials or necessary tools. Then the foreman had to file a written report explaining the workers’ situation. If the report might reveal the foreman’s negligence or that of a superior (who could get revenge) the foreman preferred to forget the whole matter and let his men take the consequences. In theory, a workman could protest. But this only invited reprisals. So he usually accepted his fate. Often there was a face-saving arrangement and the foreman, at the first opportunity, compensated by claiming an increase in the total of work done by the victim.

SOCCKER

Just outside our dining-hall, there was a large field on which, between the snow of May and that of September, various teams could play soccer. The games were hard fought and aroused great enthusiasm. There were three teams in the “league”: the miners, the builders, and other camp inmates. The officers and even the Camp Chief were rabid “rooters.”

A smaller field was used for basketball. These sports areas were not always scenes of wild enthusiasm. Often, when we were resting after the evening meal, a trumpet called us to “General Assembly.” We had to parade, barrack by barrack, for counting and roll call. Some of our guards were not too good at figures, and the roll calls had to be repeated several times until the numbers tallied. We protested in vain to the authorities about this theft of our leisure time. Eventually things improved and we could relax in peace after our labors.

MEDICAL INSPECTION

Every two or three months, there was a medical inspection in front of the medical director's office, in order to determine what level of work a prisoner might be expected to do. There were three levels, and I was always in the middle one.

At one time, the authorities were disturbed by the large number of prisoners who wore glasses, and thus were disqualified for work in the mines. Without warning, one morning, they sent in a group of doctors to check our eyes and discover shirkers. One of them was a woman named Kirilova, known for her systematic classing most of the men as perfectly fit for work, no matter what real disabilities they might have. We were not glad about her presence but we would not have dared do what one prisoner at mine *n* 8 had done. He had reported sick and had asked to be exempt from work. She refused. The next day he reported again, with a hatchet hidden under his coat, and he split her skull.

MURDERS

In our camp, incidents of violence were quite rare. The victims were usually foremen or commandants who had made themselves hated for their brutality or injustice. One of these foremen bragged about killing 35 men, and he got into an argument with the cooks. They simply took their knives and slit his belly to ribbons. With his entrails in his hands, he still had the strength to escape to the guardhouse, where he collapsed.

We had a supervisor in the Building Department who was notorious as a secret collaborator with the police. He was absolutely without conscience, a thief and a pervert. One night, as he was passing the boiler-house on his way to the barracks, a man stepped out of the shadows and butchered him with eight blows of an axe. The night shift found him and

summoned the police. Because he had been a useful agent for them, they made a thorough investigation but they never got a clue to the killer.

A third case was an execution in the mines. We had a bloodthirsty commandant, more hated than feared. He abused women, drank heavily, and exploited the misery of the prisoners. He went to the mines regularly, in pursuit of his various schemes. This proved his undoing. The miners knew his habits. Someone made a bomb and attached it to a door. After it detonated, our Commandant and his female accomplice were never seen again. The perpetrator left no clue and an investigation led nowhere.

There were other deaths, less spectacular but more tragic. At least once a month, just in mine #7, some miner was killed. A moment of inattention or carelessness, a mechanical accident, or gas “liberated” a poor wretch before his sentence was ended. There was never an attempt to assign responsibility for such deaths.

They now lie beneath the icy soil of the tundra which will preserve their bodies intact for years, as if holding them in exchange for the coal they have wrested from it in order to power the factories of Leningrad. It was as if Nature itself were sovietized: to the individual it meted out suspicion, enslavement and death; to the State it gave wealth and a greater power of exploitation. The day may come when younger generations learn in some cynical history book that “Thanks to their heroic patriotism volunteer KOMSOMOLS (Communist Youth) went boldly into the Far North and developed the coal fields. This made possible a more rapid spread of Communism in the Fatherland and the world, thanks to the brilliant direction of the Party.” Prisoners? They existed only in mendacious Capitalist propaganda.

A TURN OF THE SCREW

One of the main points of our re-education was that we had to learn to give up all idea of our individuality and personality. We had to submerge our identity and become part of the “masses” who were working selflessly for the happiness of a new human race. A step was taken in that direction, one day, when we were summoned to the guardhouse. We were given two pieces of white cloth on which were a letter and a number. Mine was 1-B-917. One piece we had to sew on our right sleeve, and the other, on our left pant-leg. Was this to shock us and make us look more like the slave-laborers? We were greatly upset. Roll-call now would consist of giving our number when our name was called out. But we soon fell back into our habit of simply saying “Present.”

Soon after, iron grilles made from barrel hoops were placed over all the windows of the barracks. The doors were covered with iron and secured with padlocks from evening roll-call until 4:00 a.m. There may have been a reason for all these precautions, but in any case the numbers officially disappeared in early 1953. The iron bars and padlocks went, after the strikes of July, 1953.

BARRACK LIFE

During the four and a half years that I lived in Camp it 7, I had to change lodging thirteen times. Often, as we returned from work, we found that our barrack had been taken over by another group, and we had to scurry around to find the best possible replacement lodging. Usually the lower tier of bunks was preferred, but I liked the upper tier better, partly because it offered more protection against thieves and partly because it would not so easily serve as a seat for anyone who chanced to come by.

In every barrack, one corner was reserved for two or three fellows who were not part of our work team. We suspected that they were police

spies and we would particularly careful of our speech when they were around.

Some of the barracks had a radio, or rather a loud-speaker, which, all day long, carried a program from Moscow. This too had a function in our re-education; but it had little effect, because we were out most of the day. In the evenings, we enjoyed the music and ignored the accompanying propaganda. One of my buddies enjoyed a song sung by a peasant woman extolling the joys of living on a collective farm. There was always a loud laugh as he slipped into bed, singing the refrain “Dear Comrade Stalin do come and pay us a visit.” This fellow was a voluntary cripple—he had cut off the fingers of his left hand with an axe, while he was cutting lumber in the forests of Siberia. He claimed that he couldn’t stand the suffering and the conditions of such work in our barrack of 40 men, another man, an old sailor, was in the same situation.

Somehow, secretly, some men were able to get drugs, an extract of hemp, which they smoked and claimed that it was very similar to opium, only weaker.

THE AURORA BOREALIS

I must mention a phenomenon that winter often brought us. The French term of “aurora borealis” is somewhat inexact, because the idea of “aurora” is linked with dawn and supposes an increase of light. The Russian term is more precise: polar reflection or radiation. They appear at the onset of night, and usually indicate an intensifying of the cold. They were so diaphanous that we could see the stars through them. They seemed like long veils, with soft and elegant curves, with scintillating edges. They spread, disappeared in one place only to reappear elsewhere, winding around two or three levels. They were generally milky-white, but sometimes had all the hues of a rainbow.

We liked to gaze at them before we went to sleep. One night in the winter of 1949-50, we saw them as even the old-timers of the Far North had never seen them. Despite the intense cold, all the prisoners were outside, going in only to warm up a bit before they came back out. That night the Northern Lights had a peculiarly impressionistic appearance: to me, they seemed like an immense dome, the keystone of which was right over our heads. Twenty-five levels of twinkling fringes, in every shade of red, played and vibrated throughout the heavens. This glimpse of fairyland lasted more than an hour and a half, heavenly fireworks breaking the prosaic monotony of our daily lives.

IMPORTANT CHANGES, 1952

For months, rumors had spread, about impending and important changes. We discounted them as so much propaganda of the NKVD which would have promised the moon in order to increase production. Finally, we had to agree with the office workers that something big was in the works. In January, 1952, official posters were put up, with the usual exhortations to work harder. We learned that, starting on March 1, we would be paid according to a scale depending on the nature of our work. Then followed complicated details, the gist of which was that at least half of the men in the camps would find their status unchanged. Once again, a distinction was made between “productive” and “unproductive” workers.

In the eyes of the authorities, the productive worker was one who worked for some organization distinct from the camp, such as the mine, which had to pay a man 60 rubles a day. Unproductive workers were those employed in the maintenance of the camp itself. The money earned by a worker was divided into several parts, with half going to the State. From the other half were deducted expenses for clothing, heating, lighting, and the general upkeep of the barracks. Eighteen rubles were

taken for food, and another percentage went to pay the guards and support the Cultural Department. This left the worker with only 10% of his earnings.

In the mines, those who surpassed the norms were to get bonuses, and this sent the production of coal up by leaps and bounds. However, in our Building Department, our employers were of a different mind. They intended to pay as little as possible to the men from the camp. So they classified as many as they could as unskilled laborers, whose wage varied from 35 to 40 rubles. Ian Ivanovich and I were listed as apprentices, even after three years of difficult and artistic assignments, which would have put in a class earning 70 or 80 rubles. When we protested, we were told to take it or leave it.

But the camp authorities went to bat for us. Of course they were interested in the percentage arrangement. We continued to be classed as apprentices until visiting dignitaries, conducting an inspection, asked how long sculpture had been considered the work of a laborer. The upshot was that we asked to leave the Building Department and return to work in the camp, provided there was a job for us there. We estimated that we should earn about 400 rubles but were getting only 45. In the camp we might not even get that, but at least it was preferable to working under a sense of injustice.

IMPROVEMENTS

If we were to earn money, we had to have ways to spend it. Tobacco, butter, jams, candy, and toilet articles were sold at a small store that was mobbed after the first payday. Its shelves were stripped bare. Men who had money left kept an alert eye on the store so as to be first in line when it received new stock. Then things would quiet down until the next payday.

An official restaurant was opened, very successfully, where, for five or six rubles, one could get a good soup, a large meatball and sweet stewed millet. For an extra ruble, there was a fruit salad. From this time on, hunger disappeared from the camp, because those who had no money continued to eat in the dining hall, while the more affluent ate in the restaurant.

I allowed myself the luxury of the restaurant on Sundays. I received some money in my packages and earned a bit more by drawing some portraits. Once in a while I got the camp bonus “when there were profits.” I also realized that in a year, provided there was no hitch, I would be free and would have to have some money saved up.

DON'T GO AWAY

Our little world had as a first boundary some barbed wire with signs “Off Limits” posted every few yards. Ten feet further was the regular barbed wire fence. I have no reason to believe that in any of the camps where I lived the fence was electrified. Beyond the fence was the guards’ road, with watch towers where guards with machine guns watched constantly. They were relieved every two hours. The towers were open to all the winds, and must have been hardship duty, especially in winter. The guards wore heavy fur coats that reached almost to the ground. All along the camp road were bright spotlights. Police dogs on a leash about 100 yards long helped keep guard. Some thirty yards further out other guard posts and more barbed wire closed off our little world.

Beyond lay the tundra which stretched until the Urals. Near the camp were village houses surrounding the Palace of Culture. The houses became more numerous each year. On the other side of the camp were the kennels where, from the threshold of our barracks, we could watch the guards train the dogs. These animals had a better menu than we had. They got 800 grams of meat, 100 grams of sugar, 200 grams of rice

(mixed with the meat), 400 grams of white bread, and 50 grams of alcohol for their paws. We could also watch the guards, garbed in old clothes, simulate an escape and train the dogs in attacking prisoners.

Besides all these security measures, there were booby traps in the barbed wire. A short distance another small camp had been V build on a little hill. Several mines lay all around us: ours, those of Camp #7 and Camp #12. A bit further away were those of Camps 5 and 6 and others. Each black pyramid told us that hundreds of other human beings were undergoing the same imprisonment as ourselves. Now and then, there were transfers from one camp to the other; and we soon learned about the people, the mentality, and the work in other camps.

Thus I learned that in Camp #12, about a mile away, there were four Frenchmen who were miners and true Communists. They had arrived as enthusiastic volunteers to work in the country of their dreams. Sent to mines in the Don Basin, they had accepted their first disillusionments rather stoically. But after a year, they had had enough. They began to criticize their new way of life and compare it unfavorably with conditions they had known in France, under the regime of “capitalist exploitation.” That was, of course, considered anti-revolutionary; and they were sent for ten years of re-education. Three of them no longer wanted to hear about Communism. They really saw red then. But the fourth man, the oldest, humbly beat his breast in self-criticism.

A railroad ran along the camp. If you followed it about a mile, you would find there a new and immense work-area, which called upon the services of many in our camp. The project, called “T.E.S. #2,” was to be an electrical plant, far more up-to-date than the one in Vorkuta. It was of primary importance for the development of the entire region. Later, when I was free, I had occasion to go there twice and I recognized some of my former camp companions. Even after two years the work was far from completed. At Vorkuta, wherever one looks or walks, there were guard

towers, eloquent reminders that the good of the Soviet State is due to the cheap labor of prisoners.

WORK AT CAMP

After leaving the Building Department, Ian Ivanovich and I were assigned to the Maintenance Department, which dealt with the upkeep of the buildings and the general appearance of the camp. We were asked to beautify the main street of the camp and the central square, by adding statues and reliefs. Our plans were ambitious because we didn't intend to be unemployed. We split up the work and got down to it immediately.

We resorted to a variety of means, including larceny and intrigue, to obtain the necessary materials and tools. Soon, the camp was adorned with statues of miners, athletes animals, and decorative urns and fountains, as well as an outdoor theater.

The authorities encouraged us, because they stood to gain the annual prize awarded to the camp with the most attractive appearance. A jury of delegates from all the camps visited the camps and decided which one would win the prize. We won. The Camp Commandant, for his personal benefit, received 10,000 rubles and the Camp got a brand new movie projector. Personally, we had to be content with having the artistic satisfaction of self-expression.

The winter of 1952-53 and the following Spring were largely spent in modernizing the Club. Many prisoners volunteered to work one or two hours after their daily stint. In fact, I was still working on a large ornamental vase at the time of my release. Of course, all this work did not release us from occasional chores like loading coal. This happened rarely, but we still found it tiring and boring.

STAFF OFFICERS

Not all the NKVD men had the fatherly attitude of Pivorarov at Petropavlosk. Instinctively we steered clear of them. If we did meet one, we had to greet him “Good day, Citizen Officer.” The best known and least beloved was the “KOUM,” a sort of Dean of Discipline. He was almost ubiquitous, always on the lookout for the slightest fault, and informed about all that he did not see himself. His name was Prokhorov, and he was gross, harsh, intransigent, but at the same time relatively just.

Above this “Deany was the Camp Commandant. During my time we had several, Malikov, Sabateev, and Aleksandrov among them.

One of them had to be removed for what was, in fact, an excess of truthfulness. One day, in a rage, he shouted, “We know that you are all against us. You’re hoping that your American friends will come and free you. Don’t kid yourselves. Before they come, we’ve got a bullet for each of you.”

All this was true, but...it shouldn’t have been said. We knew, on good authority, that a “black list” had been drawn up, in case of any emergency. The officer didn’t have to tell us. The political police were more subtle. They conducted their investigations in strict secrecy, and anyone called for questioning was forbidden to reveal this fact under threat of dire punishment. I was called once at Petropavlovsk, once at Artau, and three times at Camp #7. There were also other “conversations” immediately preceding my liberation. I merely note the fact and will say no more.

On the other hand, the guards in the lower echelons were quite decent fellows, for the most part. They liked to stop and chat with us. Many of them were serving in the Far North as a result of disciplinary measures or following certain indiscretions. Their situation was not far removed from our own. One Adjutant named Kabanov, who had served in the army of Vlasov, was recognized by prisoners in Mine 29 who had

been his former comrades. After blackmailing him for a time, they denounced him and he was arrested.

Some guards were obnoxious. One in particular always seemed to be searching for candidates for the punishment cell. One Christmas night, after padlocking the door of a barrack, he suddenly and unexpectedly went back in and found the prisoners having a party with the contents of the packages they had received. Without saying a word, he knocked all the food to the floor and trampled on it. His only reason seemed to be to show contempt for the religious feelings of the men. The next day, the men reported him to the Commandant, and the officer was reprimanded, not for bullying prisoners, but “for deliberately wasting the produce of Soviet soil.”

RELIGION

Many prisoners were deeply interested in religion and this was particularly noticeable around the time of the great Christian feasts of Christmas and Easter. Little groups of the same nationality would gather in a corner of the barrack and reminisce about the celebration of various feasts in their homeland. In the evenings, after work, they would sing their hymns. The others would listen with respect. Any display of anti-religious feeling was very rare, in spite of the fact that most of our companions were ignorant or indifferent in this matter.

GENERAL MENTALITY OF PRISONERS

The state of mind of a camp is, of necessity, tied in with the diversity of races represented and the conditions in which the men live. The mentality had many nuances, but some common characteristics could be found, provided a distinction be made between Soviet subjects and foreigners.

In our camp at the beginning, were 4,000 men, of 56 nationalities and almost as many different languages. (In the Soviet Union alone there are more than 84 races and languages.) Our common bond was our desire for freedom. But the concept of this freedom, and the consequent attitude toward our imprisonment varied greatly, depending on whether a man was a Soviet citizen or a foreigner.

Former soldiers, who had lived in other countries, were more angry at the breaking of promises that had caused them to return than at the charge that they should have committed suicide rather than be taken prisoner. There were very few intellectuals in the camps, only the few needed to set a tone. It was almost as if the number of arrests had been determined by the needs of the prison system. Most prisoners were workmen and peasants. If most of them seemed hostile to the State or even to socialism, it seemed to be the result rather than the cause of their incarceration. All the prisoners hated the penal system, but most of them remained passive, and very divided in their attitude toward the regime. They had a certain resignation, as if prison life differed from freedom only in the restrictions on alcohol and sex.

“Half the people,” they would say, “have been in prison and the other half will go there soon.” Or again, “Never think yourself safe from prison or madness.” One might say that, to some extent, the prisoner regarded his situation in much the same way as a conscript regards his period of military service. But everyone did not embrace this fatalistic attitude. Otherwise the strikes of 1953 would never have taken place.

In general, I found that prisoners of Soviet origin had no abstract idea of “Freedom.” The word meant, for them, only personal freedom rather than the exercise of political rights. They could not conceive of liberty as it exists in our countries of the West, even when they concede that such a thing might be possible. Or they consider it a sort of indulgence harmful to the community.

There was no doubt about their patriotism. A young man said to me, "I am against the Bolsheviks; but if some day our country were attacked I would shed my blood to defend it." This attitude was widespread.

Against this must be set the outraged national sentiments of men whose country had been "liberated" by the Russians. At times they were violent in their hatred of the Red Invaders.

The attitude of Russian prisoners toward foreign prisoners was one of tolerance mixed with a kind of commiseration, as a result of official propaganda. It contrasted the wonderful achievements of the Soviets with the miserable stagnation of effete capitalism. They accepted without question the "colonialist" action of Americans against France. One well intentioned prisoner assured me that one day they would come and set us free.

This "Love for all Peoples" did not extend to the Jews. I noticed, in the camps and again as a free man, considerable anti-Semitism. It was shown only in words, but it was there. To me, it seemed based on jealousy of an intelligent people who can reconcile their own interests with the services they can render. In my case, I owe a great deal to the Jewish foremen I had during my captivity.

DIFFERENT KINDS OF PRISONERS

Four and a half years in the same camp gave me the opportunity of meeting and associating with many men. Not all now stand out in my memory, and surely I never met many who probably would deserve recognition. Some, for various reasons, I can never forget. For example, Hezemli Djann Atamali Mullah, a Kazakh, over 100 years old, with a long, spare beard. Tall, slim, cane in hand, every day he would come into the dining hall with the dignity of a mandarin. He had been the chief of his clan, and like many others had been arrested for being too rich. He had been sentenced to ten years. A long time had elapsed since then, but

every ten years he had been notified that his sentence had been extended by the same period. Each time, his gratitude had known no bounds, because the police had granted him a lease on life longer than that usually allowed by Allah

Then there was Ivan Mikhailovitch Gromski, a fine fellow. He was a convinced Communist, a disciple of Lenin, a frequent guest of Stalin and, until 1937, editor-in-chief of *Izvestia*. One day he had published a story on Soviet agricultural policy that did not agree with Stalin's. He had been summoned to the Kremlin, reprimanded by his Master, and then sent to the camps for ten years.

To reach Vorkuta, he had had to travel almost 500 miles on foot. His spirit of discipline and self-criticism were such that he found it quite natural that this severe penalty be inflicted on him. He accepted it like a child would accept standing in a corner for five minutes.

None of us who were together in Camp #7 can ever forget "Coco." He was Hungarian by nationality and a comedian by nature. He never ceased clowning, either on or off stage. His work was easy and he was welcome everywhere. The laughter he provoked lightened our burden, and won our undying gratitude.

A man whom I considered a real friend was Sergei, a professional juggler and a typical Russian. Short and stocky, and apparently, always worried, he was absolutely unpredictable. He was big-hearted, loyal, completely unselfish, and a tireless worker. He was also very touchy and would fly into the most violent rages without warning. Then, having poured forth a stream of rich invective, always in crescendo but without repetition, he would resume his quiet and cheerful manner without any apparent transition.

Sergei had a great deal of artistic sensitivity. He was interested in music, had a fine voice, and had given concerts. He practiced an hour or two every day and, as he was particularly fond of romantic and operatic

airs, he would add his own lyrics, which, as often as not, were prayers. He came to work with Ian and me, to help decorate the camp. This was satisfying and helpful to us. When I was released, he embraced me three times, in the Russian manner, and I felt this deeply.

MEN FROM HOME

Until now, in order to emphasize it properly, I have deliberately refrained from mentioning one of the most important events of my life as a prisoner. To do this, I have to back up three years. In May, 1950, a new group of men arrived at mine 8-7. I was told that in it there were some Frenchmen. In the five years since my arrest, I had never met a single countryman. So I hurried over to the door of the barrack where the new men were being kept. As the men came out I kept asking where the Frenchmen were.

The first one I actually met was Armand Maloumian, a young Parisian student who told me that he and his companions had been arrested in Germany and brought to Vorkuta from a camp at Sachsenhausen. He introduced me to the others:

Raymond Souaillat, a sailor whose ship had been requisitioned by the Germans and then sunk in Hamburg. He had been arrested in Berlin while compiling a list of the French dead buried in military cemeteries.

Edouard Goralski, born in Northern France, of Polish parents. He was just seventeen years old.

Jean, a Rumanian who had lived several years in France. He had known Armand Maloumian at Vaucresson and had introduced his fiancée to him. The war had separated them and now they met again at Vorkuta.

Kostikov was of Russian origin, and had fled after World War I and enlisted in the French army, in which he served thirty years.

There was also another man, a Belgian engineer named Philip Dejaegher, who had been hospitalized as soon as he had arrived. I was told that other Frenchmen had been sent to Camp #8. We talked and talked that night, in all the time that was available to us. That night, I went to the hospital to see Dejaegher. He was suffering from synovitis, brought on by the beatings and rough treatment he had received during his trial. He received little medical care and was unable to walk. After a while he improved somewhat and was able to move around, but remained quite invalid. The circumstances which brought these men to Vorkuta are beyond the scope of my story; but their arrival was, for me, a tremendous source of inner strength, especially since I had been so isolated from any contact with my homeland. We knew that we could trust each other. And the fact that, among ourselves, we could speak French was an added protection against informers.

Each one tried to organize his life as much as possible. But some were singled out for special treatment by the authorities. Armand seemed to be the prime target: he was always assigned to the heaviest and most distasteful work. Edouard and Raymond were sent to work in the deepest galleries of the mines. Jean was a common laborer but none of the foremen could get him to work. He was sent to the punishment cell several times but remained incorrigible. Somehow he was given a job in the kitchen. Because of their poor health, Kostikov and Dejaegher became janitors in the barracks.

Several months later, another Frenchman, Paul I..., arrived from another camp.

I do not feel authorized to mention the various reasons that led to this gathering of so many Frenchmen. But I insist on mentioning the almost fraternal friendship that united us and the moral support that we gave each other. Camp life allowed each of us to benefit from his talents and aptitudes. Jean soon became “Mr. Soccer” despite his difficulties. He

energized the team, and also took part in many other camp activities. He was in the orchestra and played roles in several of the sketches put on in the concert hall. I remember one occasion when his impersonation of Charlie Chaplin brought down the house. From his pocket he took out his lunch: a very tiny piece of black bread. To cheer himself up, he took an immense magnifying glass from another pocket and thus magnified his meal. I don't remember whether the officers who were present understood the allusion, but the rest of the audience certainly did, and they applauded hard and loud. The same effect happened when Armand, disguised as an old marquise, sang "*Tout va tres bien.*"

Another time, Armand climbed up the clock tower and bellowed the Marseillaise. When the guards ordered him to come down, he did so to the tune of "I don't like policemen." We tried to keep alive within us this hope for better days. As a result, the other prisoners soon began to regard us with new respect.

Later, after I left the camp, a strike broke out at Vorkuta, beginning with our mine #7. It is not surprising that the fervent yearning for freedom of Jean, Philip, and Armand should make them leaders in the Central Committee of the strike.

Armand and I received packages that enabled us to organize little parties on leisure days or holidays. Christmas, 1951, was a very special occasion. Our barrack leader looked on benignly as we conspired to do what had never been done in the camp. All was prepared in secret. At the appropriate moment we displayed a big tablecloth with the word "Noel." And we brought the supplies that we had been saving up for weeks: hams, sausages, cookies, jams, butter, and a heap of candies. But the *piece de resistance* was a special pie, very delicious, made from a recipe given to me by a Rumanian.

Before we began our meal, we sang a carol softly, so as not to disturb the hundreds of sleeping men. At the end, Armand made us a

surprise gift. For each of us, he had had painted a picture appropriate to the occasion, and each of us autographed the back of them. “These will be for us,” he said, “a souvenir of this present gathering and a pledge that we shall, as soon as possible, gather again in France, in freedom. This wish was only partly realized, because as of this writing, Jean is still a prisoner in Rumania.

A gathering in 1952 was also quite special. The camp officials had offered live ducks for sale. Jean got one of the cooks to roast it, and we had a royal feast.

One last memory of my friends in the camp moves me deeply, even now. The day I was released, they handed me a sum of money saved out of their meager monthly earnings. In spite of my protests, they insisted that I take it. “Sure, you’ll be free, but you’ll need to buy bread. As for us, each day we’ll get our ration. That’s enough.” What can I say about friends like that?

OFFICIAL MOURNING

The camp radio, on March 5, gave us the news of the death of Stalin. Everyone was excited and was wondering if this might mean an early release for all of us. It would not make much difference to me, because in a month and a half I would finish my eight year sentence.

All the soldiers were wearing black armbands edged in red. On the day when the body was brought to the mausoleum in the Kremlin, we were ordered to listen to the ceremony over the radio, and at the solemn moment to stand at attention at the foot of our beds. All of this did not stop some nasty commentaries made far from prying ears. There was a wagging of heads when some recalled the hullabaloo on the 70th birthday of “Old Mustache Joe.”

On that occasion, the newspapers had been filled with bombastic praise. On one page alone, we had been able to find his name mentioned

70 times before we quit counting. A year later congratulatory telegrams were still being published. I remember little of these things, but I can never forget a poem that was read over the radio. It was just a litany of praise and gratitude, but it ended with the following words addressed to the new "Messiah," the Savior of a new human race: "Thank you for having deigned to be born on our soil." Intentional or not, it was just plain blasphemy.

THE LAST DAYS

Psychologically, the last three months of my sentence were the hardest. I was terribly nervous; each day seemed endless. Twelve days before my release, I had a right to a short "vacation." I left my work unfinished, much to the displeasure of the foreman, who could do little more than deprive me of the 40 or 50 rubles of salary for my last month.

Three months previously, I had got permission from the Camp Commandant to let my hair grow. I got someone to make me a little suitcase, and I bought a new pair of boots. I was getting ready for the great day. Our small group of friends had a final meal in the restaurant.

I had to fill out endless forms in the office. I had to endure lectures from the police. I had to say goodbye to everyone I knew, ^finally the desired moment arrived. I embraced and thanked my friends, and wished them good luck. Then I walked out of the gate, a free man. It was Saturday, April 17, 1953.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE FREE LIFE

THE FIRST DAY

Two of us were released the same day. A third man, due for release, had died of tuberculosis a couple of weeks before. The train for Vorkuta left at 7:30 a.m. I gave a final glance to the camp and all the work accomplished there during more than four years.

A soldier with his rifle slung over his shoulder escorted us to the authorities who were to free us. Our freedom was not official until we had reported to them. So we traversed the entire town, came back on our steps, and finally found the correct office. Our escort saluted us politely and wished us good luck.

Then a lieutenant handed us a paper and told us to read it carefully. My heart sank as I read the first few words: "As a former political prisoner in a camp of Strict Discipline you must abandon for ever all hope of returning to your own country. You will live in whatever place is designated to you by the competent authorities, and for the time being this will be in Vorkuta. You must present yourself every two weeks at the Office of Special Control. Any unauthorized change of residence will be interpreted as an attempt to escape and is punishable with a sentence of twenty years hard labor."

"Have you read it? Sign it," said the lieutenant.

The smile of joy and hope that we had had upon entering the office abruptly disappeared. It was almost sadly that we both signed our "Charter of Freedom." Yet, I was somewhat grateful that it allowed me to remain near my friends rather than be sent to Siberia, as some had. I

realized that it was impossible to be repatriated immediately, but I had never expected such continual supervision...and menace.

Then we were sent to have our photos taken. We were to return to the office in the afternoon to receive our necessary papers. As we left the office, we found waiting for us a former companion in the camp. He had been released two months before us and had come to invite us to his home to celebrate our release.

After that I had to try and find a lodging for the night. When the civilian electricians had been working at the Palace of Culture, one of them, an agreeable young man, had said to me “When you’re released, if you don’t know where to go, come to me You’ll be able to stay with me until you can find more permanent lodging.”

He had given me his address. His invitation was already more than two years old, but I went to knock on his door. He lived in the last room of a windowless corridor, lit meagerly by a single bulb, cluttered with all kinds of objects, from which opened the doors of about twelve rooms, each one occupied by a different family. It was not attractive.

His wife, holding her baby son in her arms, opened the door. Having learned the reason for my visit, she told me that her husband was at work but that she was sure he’d be glad to see me. Would I please return later? She was very gracious.

Then I went to the photographer to pick up the pictures that had been taken that morning. I brought them to the lieutenant and a few moments later received my official identity papers which, as I noticed, were valid until December 1, 1954. Then I was registered with the Militia, and from then on would have only the rights they chose to give me.

That evening, I found Ivan waiting for me in his tiny apartment, neat and clean in spite of its dingy surroundings. He greeted me warmly, insisted on my dining with them, and produced the inevitable bottle of

vodka. Eight years in prison was poor preparation for drinking. I still felt the effects of my celebratory toast of the morning. But Ivan would have been offended if I refused. After dinner, we sat and talked about the good old days. Then his wife made up a divan bed for me, on which I slept my first night as a free man. Next day, he loaned me his coat so that I could look around the town and do some shopping.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Vorkuta was quite different from when I had seen it in 1947 and in 1950. It had grown larger and more beautiful. It was a real town now. This is small consolation to the poor prisoners who had been driven so hard to effect these improvements. I had never felt satisfied with my work in the Gastronom, the store to which I had been sent from Camp #7, because our work had been too rushed. But I had to admit that the store was a fine building, and our capitals were still in good shape. When I entered to buy a pack of cigarettes, I was amazed by the array of foodstuffs that met my eyes. There were counters for meat, fish, staples, wine, tobacco, breads etc., with all the goods displayed under glass. Each department bore the name of the salesgirl, in case of complaints. The whole place was irreproachably clean. After my spartan diet in the camps, it came as a shock to me that all these things should be considered necessary for life. I could see that it would take a little time for me to adjust to my new way of life.

I walked up the Main Street, past the Hotel Sever, the public baths, the movie theatre, the drugstore, the hospital, the mining school, and arrived finally, near the railroad station, at the *Univermag*, a general store which sold everything that was not foodstuffs. I spent some of my 700 rubles to buy a jackknife and a razor, articles strictly forbidden in the camp. To me, they were my declaration of independence.

MY FIRST SUNDAY

At the end of my first week, I decided to go and see Alexandr Alexandrovich, my former supervisor at the House of Culture. He was glad to see me and invited me to lunch. He and his wife gave me some information about finding a job and about my behavior as a free man. In the afternoon, I went to the movie theatre on which I had worked and was delighted to find it in good condition, despite the fact that the rest of the House of Culture bore signs of vandalism: filthy toilets, broken tiles, dirty floors, and doors without doorknobs.

I could not resist the temptation of looking over the camp. Walking along the railroad, about ten yards from the barbed wire, I stared at this place where I had spent so many months. Some of my friends sitting on the doorsteps recognized me and shouted greetings. I could not acknowledge them because I was too close to the watch tower.

DOMESTIC BLISS

I stayed ten days with Ivan, during which I was trying to get my bearings. I knew that I would have to find work soon, because my finances were in a bad state. So I tried the GUEREU, where Adrian Mikhailovich received me warmly. He would have liked to give me a job, but could not, because I was a former "Strict Discipline" case. I ran into the same problem at the architectural center. It began to look as if I would have to take an ordinary laboring job.

Days passed, and April was very warm. The thaw set in and my thick padded clothes soon became unbearable. I had to dig even deeper into my savings to buy a cheap suit of mattress ticking, for which I had to pay 700 rubles.

One evening, after searching in vain for a job, I went back to Ivan's and stretched out on the divan. I was awakened by the sounds of a

violent argument. Ivan had been drinking and had come home in a very ugly mood. He and his wife shouted at each other. There were blows; and they began to bombard each other with everything they could grab: plates, dishes, flowerpots, and a clock. Fortunately, some of the neighbors came in and intervened. Two men took Ivan away, and a woman brought his wife to her apartment. At midnight, I was alone on the field of battle it took me a couple of hours to straighten things up somewhat. Next evening, when I came home, they had made up and all seemed as usual. But I had decided that I had better find a more peaceful lodging.

A FRIEND IN NEED

Somewhat desperate, I applied to the Building Department, giving as references the work I had done in the Camp. The Chief Engineer told me to come back in a couple of days. When I went back, he said he would hire me because of a strong recommendation from one of the architects in the Camp, the one whose plans I had treated in such a cavalier fashion.

Work was beginning on a new school, and the authorities, naturally, did not want it to be in any way inferior to the school in the outlying community of Oktiabrski, on which I had worked. I was asked to be responsible for the decoration.

So, on April 25, I went back to the Vorkuta Building Department as a free, paid worker. I needed a place to live. I was sent to the outskirts of the town where the outfit had stables for the animals, and three buildings for the personnel. The only vacant spot was a ramshackle room of about ten square yards. It badly needed repair.

When I reported this, I was told that it would be fixed if it suited me. Meanwhile one of the truckers offered to let me stay with him temporarily.

Before I could actually start work, I had to go through several formalities: see the doctor, notify the Militia, register my lodging, and obtain my worker's card. Many things had to mesh together.

"Certainly," explained the Chief Engineer, "we hire you to do architectural decoration and you will be paid on that pay scale. But the plans do not foresee such embellishments and I can't do it officially. I'll list you as a plasterer. But you are to do no plastering, but only do sculpture and molding." By this time, I was glad to do any kind of work.

MY LODGINGS

The trucker with whom I was staying was Ukrainian. He said he'd spent some years in France, but it was obvious that he had not picked up much of the language. I understood his Russian better than his French.

His room was quite large and was furnished with a bed, a table and two stools. It would be no hardship for me to sleep on the floor, but I had to buy some blankets. Now I was on the verge of bankruptcy. I had to eat, until my first paycheck on May 15. At the office, they had offered an advance, but I had stupidly refused. I could allow myself only a ruble and a half per day, just enough for a piece of bread. For the last few days before my paycheck, I had only a ruble per day to spend. My neighbors or my landlord took pity on my penniless state and sometimes offered me soup. The repairs to my room went so slowly that I spent two months with the Ukrainian. Then my budget let me do the bare minimum.

I was in a hurry to leave the trucker's room, because he often came in drunk and insisted on telling endless stories which did not interest me in the least. Two years before, on leaving the Camp, he had "married" Nordic style, and now he and his wife lived at opposite ends of the town from each other. He was not noticeably perturbed by his situation and often brought home girls he had picked up. For the two months that I

stayed with him I was a powerless and passive witness of his grossest intimacies.

With the first few rubles I scraped together, I began fixing up my lodging. It was now summer, and I hoped to be through before winter came. Some soldiers sold me an old iron bed for twenty-three rubles. A neighbor loaned me a stool and that completed my furnishings. The main features of my dwelling were: the smell of horses, the constant background of obscene language of the stable-hands, and the rats that scurried into my room from holes in the floor.

With time I bought boards to refinish my floor. I had the walls replastered and a brick stove built. I got a table, some chairs, a buffet and a wardrobe, some dishes, and a hotplate. I bought these bit by bit, each month, as I received my paycheck.

I had to pay the town about sixty rubles a month for electricity. My neighbors had to pay a rent of between 3 % and 5 % of their salary, but the Building Department charged me nothing.

To undertake the school decoration, I demanded the molds of the low-reliefs I had already made. With a safe-conduct, I was able to go to work-zone #7 where I had the joy of meeting old acquaintances. We spoke at quite some length. Meanwhile the reliefs had been sent to the new electrical plant. So I had to go there, and was able to admire the gigantic work being done there. Here too the work was done by “Komsomols,” otherwise known as prisoners. The following day I was able to bring back my molds by truck.

ADAM ADAMOVICH LABETSKI

When I was hired, the director of the organization was on vacation. After his return, he visited the work areas and became interested in my project. His name was Adam Adamovich Labetski. Already elderly and sickly, he didn't seem too sympathetic. He constantly lost his temper

because nobody could work quickly enough to please him. His main concern was to collect the bonus given to groups who exceeded their quota. I was told that at one time he had been closely associated with Dzerjinski, the founder of the Cheka, or Secret Police, known later as OGPU, then NKVD, and now as MVD.

When I was later advised that I was able to return to France, I was in the midst of much work for the Communist Party Center in Vorkuta. Labetski sent for me and inquired how long it would take to finish my models. When I told him it would take two months, he replied "Well, if you want to return to France, hurry up with the work you've started."

"It's been fifteen years since I left France," I said, "two more months won't make a lot of difference."

He sat down and wrote a note that I was to deliver to the Militia, vetoing my immediate departure. I was not greatly upset because I didn't have enough money to pay my fare. The big news had come as a complete surprise to me and my paid vacation would easily take care of my needs.

ACCORDING TO LAW

At Butyrskaya, I had been given a receipt for the objects that had been confiscated from me in Odessa. I had kept it very carefully, even through searches. I now discovered that in town there was an office for "Administration of Prisoners' Property." I went there and demanded the return of my property. I was told to return in two weeks. Here is textually the answer I got: "We are deeply grieved, it's the first time that something like this has happened. We requested the return of your watch, but Moscow has answered that because it has been on deposit more than five years the watch has been declared forfeit and sold for the benefit of the State."

For eight years I had been deprived of any right to claim my property, but after five years it had become State property. All I could do was buy another watch, whenever I had the funds.

As I mentioned earlier, Vorkuta had made great strides but it still did not have a store that sold watches. I found in the post office a catalog of a Moscow mail-order company, which offered many articles not usually stocked in the stores. I picked out a watch, priced at 370 rubles, sent in my order and three weeks later received the timepiece which I am using to this very day.

THE STRIKES

I mention these famous upheavals only because I was in Vorkuta when they happened. I will not repeat what eyewitnesses have already written.

On July 19, 1953, I had been released from prison camp three months. Nobody in town spoke openly about the strikes but a lot of whispering went on. We could see the unusual concentration of troops, hear the occasional bursts of machine-gun fire, and note that the coal trains were not moving.

Later, I got a first-hand account from the janitor of Barrack #40. He too was now a Tree man, but had been present for the outbreak of the strike and knew something of the way it had been organized. He had watched its growth and its final suppression and had seen the Moscow authorities arrive and make concessions which they promptly ignored.

At Camp #1, just outside Vorkuta, the men had taken no part in the strike. Some were miners and others worked for the Building Department. We were two or three free men among 150 or 200 prisoners and from them I kept abreast of the details of camp life. Bit by bit, almost in spite of myself, my freedom did not allow me to see things from the same point of view as before.

I had always been wary of informers, and now was even more careful. They were everywhere. Therefore I was on guard when a prisoner told me that in a couple of days a Frenchman would be released and would probably come to ask for my hospitality. "We will see," is all I answered.

Some of these men were decent fellows, but some seemed to go out of their way to draw some compromising remark or action from me, which might be used as a pretext to return me to the kind of life I had just left.

A COMPATRIOT

Not long after, a man approached the guards where I was working and asked for me. It was the Frenchman, who did not know my address but had been told I was with the Building Department.

I did my best to do for him all the things that I knew, from personal experience, would be useful to him in adjusting to his freedom. Soon we became friends. At the outset, things went hard for him because he could only find laboring jobs, where the pay was low. He changed his work five times, from the brick kiln to the tundra, until he was finally able to get a job as ticket seller at the movie theatre. He could find lodging only in a common dormitory, with less than desirable roommates. When I left Vorkuta, he had tears in his eyes and asked me to go and see his mother who lived near Paris. This I did, and tried to console the poor old lady, who is still awaiting her son's return.

MALIAVKA

A neighbor asked me if I would like a puppy. I thought that it would be company and amusement for me; and I said I would. So Maliavka came into my life. So that she would not be stolen I would lock her in

my room as I left for work. When I returned especially in the early days, I would find the place a shambles. She dragged the bedclothes into a corner, scattered and gnawed on my books, chewed my shoes, and once pranced out to meet me completely covered with flour. She broke my eyeglasses. After each episode, she seemed so contrite that I did not lose hope of training her. She grew and her conduct improved. I needed no alarm clock: at six on the dot she yanked on my sheets to wake me up.

Her presence was useful; she sensed danger from a distance and started to bark furiously. She often scared off drunks who roamed around the stables.

One month before I left, she seemed to sense our separation. I couldn't move without finding her underfoot. I would have liked to bring her with me; but that was impossible and I gave her to a fine fellow who worked in the restaurant, as he had requested.

NEIGHBORS

Some two hundred yards on each side of me were prisoner camps. I often encountered them but the guards roughly told me to keep my distance. Between the camps were some small houses which served as barracks for the soldiers.

My more immediate neighbors, besides the horses, were some drivers who lived with their families in three huts about a hundred yards from my room. I chatted with them often and we used to exchange small services. They worked as carters for the Building Department, and each one had his own method for making a few extra rubles each day, which they'd then spend on vodka. According to the reactions of each to the liquor consumed, there would be various forms of uproar every day. One man no longer recognized his wife and children, locked himself in and forced them to sleep outside. Another was a hatchet man; he was jealous and would go after his wife with an axe or knife. Somebody usually

managed to wrest the instrument from him. Still another would not let his family eat. And there were other cases. The men who were not drunk were usually trying to borrow money so that they too could get drunk. I was lucky that they did not come to me to borrow the 25 rubles needed to get a half liter of vodka.

Only one of them did not drink, but he had other problems: he was living with a dressmaker who had two young daughters. He had been married before, legally and disastrously, to a woman who brought him three children as a dowry. This fellow, naive and sincere, adopted the children legally. After that the woman made his life so miserable that he sued for a divorce. Naturally she obtained custody of the children and that meant, under Soviet law, that he had to contribute 25% of his earnings for the support of each child until it had reached the age of twenty-one. He had to work so hard to make these payments that he didn't have time to drink.

This example may help explain why many people preferred to live in concubinage rather than run the risk of being involved in a similar situation. "Official morality" might be strict, but many got around it when they had forgotten or lost essential principles.

THE PEOPLE OF VORKUTA

One third of the people in town, including all my neighbors, were ex-prisoners. Another third consisted of families who had been "deported" because they were unfortunate to live too close to the frontier or were suspected of being hostile to the regime, or simply because they were of German extraction. It made no difference that the ancestors of these latter people had lived along the banks of the Volga for centuries. Vast regions capable of development needed to be populated, at whatever cost. Besides the Germans of the Volga, there were a large

number of Balts and Western Ukrainians who, in return for their work, could try to make a new life for themselves.

As long as they properly registered their places of residence, ex-prisoners could move about quite freely in the area. On the other hand, the deportees were subject to regulations which differed according to their country of origin. The strictest rules applied to the Germans of the Volga. They were forbidden to return to Germany and some were restricted to a specific area. But apart from that they were free enough. They could even own rifles and were allowed to hunt.

Military personnel, quite numerous, formed a separate and privileged caste that had priority in getting lodgings built for the “workers.” Then the last third of the population consisted of free people from the center of Russia who had volunteered to work for several years in the Far North. They could take advantage of a special bounty awarded as follows: for the first year the workman received his normal rate of pay, and for the first six months of his second year he got a 10% increase. For each six months after he got an increment of 20%, until at the end of the sixth year he received double pay for exactly the same work.

In fact, such a workman in the Far North would be making about six times as much as he would have in Moscow. No wonder the State was anxious to have prisoners as slave-laborers in the region. It is not surprising that free workers in the Far North, who otherwise would have been hard put to balance a budget, had well-filled bank accounts. And I have heard that the bounty system has since been suppressed, but I have been unable to confirm this.

CONSEQUENCES OF AN AMNESTY

The amnesty granted after Stalin’s death, in 1953, benefited only common-law prisoners; and this had tremendous repercussions on

civilian life. One result was the wave of strikes in the camps. Besides, Vorkuta was invaded by bands of criminals whose only experience lay in the field of crime and debauchery. It was no longer safe to go out alone at night, and the Militia had to send for reinforcements. Passersby would be asked for a light or to tell the time, etc., and then were promptly robbed. Workers returning from work would find their rooms ransacked and emptied of everything, even furniture. Their neighbors had barricaded themselves into their own quarters, thankful that the brigands had not bothered them.

This situation lasted for a month or two, until the authorities had to intervene. Most of the people amnestied were arrested and re-interned, receiving heavy sentences that in many cases would last until their death. Previously, they had been better treated than the political prisoners. Now it seems that the roles are reversed.

ORGANIZATION OF WORK

On paper it seemed very simple. The various projects planned by the State were assigned to the different groups that were to carry them out. Costs of material and manpower, and the length of time allotted for the work having been determined by the State, it was only a matter of fulfilling the program as quickly and economically as possible.

When one stage of the work was completed, or at the end of each month, a technical and financial board inspected the work and, if the work was acceptable, authorized a transfer of funds that allowed the organization to meet its expenses for materials and salaries. If the work was not up to schedule or there were not sufficient funds available, the workmen might have to wait two or three weeks for their salary.

The Building Department recognized seven categories of workmen, civilians or prisoners, from night watchmen to highly skilled tradesmen. The hourly wage varied according to a man's qualifications, not

according to the work he actually did. If a tradesman was temporarily assigned to a laborer's work, he was paid only a laborer's wage.

My work fell outside all these classifications; and in order to establish my pay scale, they had to refer to the *Manual of Artistic Workers*. Usually I qualified for the highest scale, at 7 rubles and 15 kopeks per hour. For an eight hour day I received 57 rubles and 20 kopeks. My neighbors, the drivers, who had to work outside in all kinds of weather, earned only one third of what I got. Because they were working in the Far North, they still earned more than a teacher in "Russia," as the center of the country was called, who worked for an hourly pay of one ruble and fifty kopeks.

There was no overtime pay. We worked eight hours a day, six days a week, with Sundays off. After eleven months with the same organization, each worker had a right to a paid vacation, of one, two, or three weeks, or even a month, according to his status.

In a way, one might say that I worked on a contract basis: when any particular job was commissioned, I had to go to the Chief Engineer. He consulted his manual to determine how many hours the job would take. So I knew that a capital would bring me 715 rubles, no matter how fast or slow I was. If I could finish in less than the stipulated time, then I was free to accept another commission. But my work had to be inspected and approved by the architect. If it was sub-standard I would be penalized. There was no advantage to sacrificing craftsmanship to speed.



The quotas for regular work were seldom capable of being met, but I could easily meet mine, and often I earned 2,000 rubles in a month. In winter, however, I sometimes earned only 800 rubles per month, because of lack of materials or poor installation. At night the plaster froze or the molds were damaged. Then I would have to start my work over.

SICK LEAVE

Unfortunately, just at this time I fell sick. I had to go to the clinic and obtain a doctor's certificate exempting me from work and prescribing certain medications. Unauthorized absences from work could bring sanctions ranging from a simple warning to a sentence of several years in the camps. Before the war, there was a sentence of two years for being twenty minutes late for work. I was unable to return to work for two weeks, and during this time I had no right to compensation because I had not been working here for six months. The cost of medicines was a trifle because the drugstore was the cheapest store in town. I paid only eight rubles (an hour's pay) for a bottle of penicillin pills. People in hospitals are never charged and doctors are paid by the State.

RESTAURANTS

I started work at 7:00 a.m. and finished at 4:00 p.m., with an hour off at noon. As I did not have time to go home, I usually had my lunch at a workmen's restaurant, of which there were three or four in Vorkuta. It was nearly always crowded because the menu was quite varied, the portions were generous and it was cheap. For eight to twelve rubles I could generally satisfy my appetite. There was a bar there, and the beer and vodka flowed. We followed the Russian custom of choosing our menu and queuing to pay the cashier. We'd get little slips of paper,

different for each dish, which we presented to the waitress to get our meal.

The Hotel Sever had a first-class restaurant which was patronized by Army officers and office workers. The waitresses wore uniforms, the floor was waxed, and there were embroidered tablecloths. Never would I have dared go there on weekdays, in my working clothes. The prices were considerably higher than in the workers' restaurant; the menu was more varied and there were even "specialties of the house." An excellent meal, with drinks, cost between 25 to 30 rubles, half a day's salary for me. I did allow myself the luxury of dining there on Sundays, alone or with a friend. The seats were comfortable and the music and the atmosphere seemed to deepen my sense of freedom.

OTHER ENTERTAINMENT

Vorkuta had an excellent library where any worker with the proper papers from his place of employment could borrow books. I had always been fond of reading and made use of these facilities to the fullest extent. Occasionally I would go to the theatre or the movies.

My Sunday schedule was almost always thus: in the interests of cleanliness I paid a visit to the public baths, a fine building recently erected in the center of town. After that, I headed for the bazaar, which was always interesting and picturesque, very much like the one in Odessa, except that it was enclosed because of the climate. It was open every day except Monday, and on Sunday it was at its most fascinating. I rarely bought anything, because I preferred to do my shopping at a regular store. But on one occasion I bought a fine set of compasses, unobtainable in stores, from a mining student, for 90 rubles.

After that, I went around the various stores, mostly window-shopping and observing the customers. One interesting place was the commission store, where people could place on display any articles they

wished to sell. They specified the price themselves, and the State took a commission for its service. Many of the objects were in very good condition, and a careful shopper could pick up real bargains.

Sunday afternoons were devoted to visiting old friends who, like myself, had been released from the camps but were forced to remain in Vorkuta.

HOUSES AND PEOPLE

Because of my work, I was familiar with the layout of recently built houses and my Sunday visits gave me an opportunity of seeing, at first hand, the mode of life of the ordinary Russian people. Most often the new buildings were apartment houses and theoretically one family would occupy each apartment. Each contained three rooms plus a kitchen, bathroom, and a corridor with closets. Central heating came from a boiler which took care of a block of four or five buildings. This was possible because the State was the sole owner.

In fact, it was not unusual for each of the apartment rooms to house a different family. The kitchen was common property, an inconvenience that had existed in the older dwellings. Whether I liked it or not, I often witnessed inter-family disputes, especially around mealtimes. First of all, natural curiosity demanded that each housewife discover what the neighbor was having for dinner. As often as not, she was not happy when she did find out. Remarks would be passed and an argument might develop. Hard feelings were born and lived. I have seen women deliberately spit into whatever was cooking, the minute her rival's back was turned. Maybe it was reciprocal!

One section of town was reserved for individual dwellings. Lots could be leased from the State and a small house built on it. A three-room house could cost ten or eleven thousand rubles, paid for by monthly deductions from one's salary, for a period specified by contract.

If a borrower changed work location, his obligation followed him, but he could sell his house. If he wanted to build a larger house, the loan would still be the same, for 10 or 11 thousand rubles.

I visited one of these private houses on several occasions. It belonged to an engineer with whom I had become friendly. His wife was head of the Health Service. Between them they had a very fine income. One could never have suspected this from the exterior of the house. The only entrance was on the side of the house, almost hidden by a staircase. Immediately inside was a very ordinary kitchen. A narrow door through the thick wall gave access to the house proper. What a difference! Rich Oriental tapestries on the walls, a piano, carved oak furniture, precious vases! There was one jarring note: the windows were covered with stout iron bars. My host explained that the fine furnishings had been brought in through the windows, which were then barred and the house camouflaged to discourage robbers.

Ruefully I had to agree with the engineer. Only recently I had come back from work to find my door forced and the room ransacked. I had been foolish enough to leave 1300 rubles in one of my bureau drawers. They were gone, of course, but the crook, who must have been someone who knew my habits, kindly left me fifty rubles.

Once a high Party official asked me to stop at his house on my way from work, to do a bit of decorating. I did this readily but I committed an indiscretion. From my stepladder I saw, atop a closet, a package neatly wrapped in brown paper. I opened it and found, much to my astonishment, a beautiful icon. He might be a Party official but he seemed to have treated the icon with respect. I re-wrapped the package and said nothing. A few nights later he asked me if I would like to listen to some music. I said that I would be happy to do that. We sat down and listened to the radio. The radio could pick up many wave lengths, and I was surprised to be listening to the "Voice of America" in Russian.

Again I said nothing, because I couldn't decide whether he was indulging his personal taste or setting a *provocateur's* trap for me. I often reminded myself that I should be mistrustful of anyone who tried to become very friendly.

FRINGE BENEFITS

The family wage does not exist as such in the Soviet Union. A small monthly allowance of some fifty rubles is given for the children. For the first ten years, schooling is free and midday lunch is provided. There are nurseries for babies and children, because most mothers work, in factories or stores in the towns, or on the farms in the rural districts.

The State makes strenuous efforts to help people make the most of their leisure time, or to better their condition. In most offices, posters are displayed, inviting workers to spend their vacations in numerous country resorts, which apparently were well organized. The cost never exceeded the amount received for "vacation with pay." Free people could choose whatever resort they wanted, even if it was at the other end of the country. But "free" people like me had to get permission from the Militia and even then we had to remain in the general area.

One drawback, from the family point of view, was the difficulty of husband and wife to be free from their jobs at the same time. He went his way and she went hers. Often, on their return, they would have to defend themselves from all sorts of gossip, malicious or otherwise.

A worker was not obliged to take a vacation each year. The time could be accumulated so that after a few years he could take a six-month vacation. In such cases, he did not receive his vacation money until he was actually starting his leave.

If a man felt that he was physically and intellectually capable of greater things, he was given every encouragement to do so. Theoretically there was no limit to the heights he could achieve. Posters everywhere

appealed for skilled workers, gave details of available training courses, and pointed out the advantages in pay, housing, and type of work an expert could command. The required training could take a few weeks or several months. During this time, the organization for which he worked must, in theory, find him a suitable position. It had to be remembered, however, that the State never considered itself obliged in regard to any individual.

If a man failed the training course, his own organization had to hire him back. If he got his certificate, the State had to get him a position in keeping with his new competence.

In the Soviet Union women have the same rights as men, and thus can become specialized workers in factories, mines, administration, or the railroad. It was not unusual to find women as engineers or as directors of organizations. But one could also find women as brickmasons, railroad track layers, or as stevedores. Often they were stronger and better workers than men.

THE SOVEREIGN PEOPLE

During my stay at Vorkuta, there was an election, preceded by its electoral campaign. As a foreigner I had no voting rights but I followed the affair with considerable interest. Meetings were held in the Building Department (as in every organization), and anybody could propose a candidate thought worthy, even if the person did not work in the Department.

Once these preliminary meetings were over, a provisional list of candidates was drawn up. Then there was a convention of the whole town, at which the three persons with the largest number of votes would officially be nominated to contest the actual election. All were members of the Communist Party or were independents, but everyone naturally accepted the governmental program proposed by the Party.

On Election Day, every citizen received an envelope containing three slips of paper, each bearing the name of one candidate. Voting took place in the lobby of the theatre, adorned with flags and green plants for the occasion. Each voter entered a small booth, chose the slip for the candidate he wanted, placed it in the envelope which he then sealed. He emerged into public view again and slid the envelope into a large urn in the center of the room.

The vote seemed to be completely free. I must however note one small detail: each elector had been given a number which was then stamped on the voting envelope. It was imprudent for the elector to slide in a blank vote or vote for anyone except the three official candidates, because the number could be checked.

Having voted, the voter was invited to a buffet set up in an adjoining room. The State was offering refreshments to its public-minded citizens.

Meanwhile, in the streets, loudspeakers were broadcasting music and speeches as, indeed, they did every Sunday. In the evening, there were music and dancing. Vodka flowed freely and as a result, there were the usual arguments and fights. The Militia had to jail those who had celebrated too strongly, the normal ending of any holiday.

THE QUIET LIFE

While I was a Soviet worker, I had little occasion to break my daily routine. Newspapers were almost impossible to find, and the tiny speaker which I had installed in my room worked for only three weeks. Then the electric current was cut, on the pretext that some poles had to be bought and paid for. I minded my own business strictly, minding La Fontaine's moral in his *Fables*: "To live happily, let's live hidden." I was so well hidden that for eight years my family had been unable to find out whether I was still among the living.

Was I happy? Happiness is relative. But peace of soul transcends all material conditions, if one can appreciate it. Materially, I couldn't complain, when I compared my life to that of those around me, or to the life I had led in the camps.

Of course, every two weeks I had to report to the authorities and would be given the date for my next appearance. Three or four times a year, I would be told, "Comrade Lieutenant would be pleased to see you on such and such a date, at such and such a time." I had to make sure I would be there.

The conversations on these occasions were always polite and courteous, although its purpose was to check on my activities and my general outlook on life in the Soviet "Paradise." the interview could last two or three hours, and the conversation went something like this:

- "Now that you have lived so long among us, aren't you becoming just a bit materialist?"

- "Not really. I've been reading with great interest and curiosity some of your materialist books and publications, but the more I read the more I remain with my previous convictions."

- "How is that still possible?"

- "Reading your books arouses in my mind a whole host of objections which can only be resolved by the principles I already hold."

I always ended on that note and the officer would throw up his hands in despair and tell me that I could leave.

One day, while I was at work, I was asked, "How could you ever settle down to live in your own country after your experience of the Socialist way of life?"

I had an answer to that too, "Your Communist idea is to ask of each according to his abilities and to give to each according to his needs. That has been my way of life ever since I was a young lad. That is how all the

religious Orders in the Catholic Church live. But they do this for a different motive and are guided by different principles.”

One of the most disagreeable events in any worker’s life was undoubtedly to find in a newspaper that “in a wave of enthusiasm, every worker voluntarily subscribes to the State Loan.” This was a masterpiece of lying propaganda which amused no one, least of all the worker. Already, the worker has to pay a tax of 6% on a salary less than 1500 rubles, or 13% on anything over that figure. Add another 6% if he was a bachelor over 18. When you are invited (read: obliged) to sacrifice another month’s salary for the benefit of the State, no one is happy. The annual extortion (for that is what it is) can add up to 20% of a man’s earnings. I never met anyone who was enthusiastic about the State Loan. Its effect was devastating to those who earned from 200 to 300 rubles. It led to theft or the black-market. I could write another chapter on this point alone, but it does not really belong to my story.

To heat my apartment, where water would freeze in my bucket during the day, I could buy some coal from the town docks. In Vorkuta, it cost only 56 rubles a ton because there was no need for transportation. True, it was of poor quality and reserved for local consumption; but with the wood that I was allowed to bring back from work it made a fairly good blaze.

A GLIMMER OF LIGHT

In early February, I went for my routine bi-weekly visit. I was surprised but not frightened when I was told to report to the Police. The conversation went like this:

-“Do you ever write home?”

-“You know that that is forbidden.”

-“Yes, when you were a prisoner. But there is no reason why you cannot correspond now.”

-“I still prefer not to write.”

-“Why? What are you afraid of?”

-“Quite simply, of you.”

The officer burst out laughing so I went on, “First, I do not know whether or not my mother is still alive. Second, if I write ‘Dear Mother’ perhaps, like the judge at my trial, you will say that it is a code word. Third, I know that a perfectly harmless sentence can be twisted so that it bears a totally different meaning. In view of all this, I prefer not to write.”

“Very well,” said the officer, “go and write a letter. Bring it here and we shall see that it is posted at once. Does that reassure you?”

I was amazed at his insistence so I said that I would think it over and possibly send a telegram to let my people know that I was still alive. But that did not satisfy him. “Write a letter. Write as much as you want.”

Some days later, I was summoned to another office and asked whether I had my passport. I must explain that in the Soviet Union everyone has to have an identity card which is called a passport.

“I have my *spravka* certificate which was given me when I was released.”

“That’s not enough,” said the officer.

“Why not? It’s valid until the end of the year.”

“All right. But, you see, this way you seem to be a man without a country. You’ll have to request a real passport.”

“If you say so. But I’m a Frenchman.”

“Sure ... French ... or Russian, if you wish.”

I understood exactly what he was trying to find out, but I made believe that I didn’t. I quickly said, “If I need a passport, naturally I want a French one.”

“Well, go ahead and apply for one. Bring me your application and we will forward it to the proper authorities.”

Five days later, he sent for me again. “Apparently there is some confusion in Moscow as to the nature of your request. They have asked me to find out whether you want a passport or are asking to have the record of your prison sentence expunged. Or are you asking to return to France?”

“I think my request was very clear. I drew it up according to instructions you gave me and simply asked for a French passport.”

“Very well. We will telephone.”

The last word intrigued me. Why were things so urgent that he had to telephone Moscow? A few days later, they returned to me the documents and military card that they had confiscated nine years before. Apparently, the State had not declared these forfeit and for sale, as they had done for my watch. On this occasion, the officer asked me whether I enjoyed my work and was earning enough, adding, “You see, we are really interested in you.”

To this I replied, “I have known that for nine years now.” He did not seem to notice the irony.

THE GREAT NEWS

On March 28, 1954, I was summoned to the Office of Surveillance and from there an officer led me to the Police Headquarters at the other end of town. This had never happened before and I was curious to find out what was going on. But I had to sit on a bench for over an hour and a half before I was ushered in to the officer in charge. Once again, there was an interminable series of questions to establish my identity (I think there is nothing so humiliating or so belittling) and then came a long silence, punctuated only by a succession of throat-clearing noises.

The man seemed embarrassed. He kept shifting papers from one end of his desk to the other. Several times, he went over to a closet and came

back, muttering to himself. Finally he seemed to have made up his mind. “The Highest Soviet Authorities,” he said, “You know who they are?”

“Yes,” I replied, “I think they are the Ministers, the Police.”

“Exactly,” he broke in, “Well, the Highest Authorities, in agreement with the French Embassy, have decided... (a pause) ... to repatriate you, if you wish...”

For a few moments my mind went blank. Of course I knew that something like this had been in the wind. But I had been afraid to let myself think about it. So I pulled myself together, remembering that I had been “re-educated,” looked over at the officer who, devoid of all expression, was awaiting my reaction. I said, “This is rather unexpected. When I was released from the Camp, I was asked to sign a document which said I was renouncing all hope of returning home. This is something I did not seek... but since you now invite me to go home, I am inclined to accept your offer.”

Inwardly, my emotions were like the peal of victory bells. I was going home to family, to freedom, to a normal life... but there was no need to tell the officer how I felt. “Of course you are not forced to go,” he hastened to inform me. “If you wish to stay here, all you have to do is obtain a Soviet passport.”

I said, “If my mother is still alive, I am sure she would be very happy to see me. For her sake, I will return to France.”

“In this case then you will make a request for a passport, in French for your Embassy, and in Russian for me. Send it to us and we shall take the necessary steps.”

Outside in the street I felt absolutely drunk with excitement. I ran to the theatre to tell my good news to my friend who worked there. When I got home, I ran around to my neighbors shouting, “I’m going home to France.”

At work next day, I was bursting to tell my co-workers but their reaction was less than enthusiastic. In fact, if I had been calmer, I would have realized that their remarks were merely the expression of any ex-prisoner's outlook on life. They told me, "Don't get too excited and just be careful. This may simply be a trick to give the police an opportunity to pick you up again. It's a long way from here to the frontier. A lot of things can happen to a man who is travelling and there will be nobody to ask any questions."

In the office of the Building Department, my news was greeted with genuine pleasure for I was very friendly with the people there. The only discordant note was Labetski's vote which I have already mentioned. A letter from Moscow, dated April 13, informed me that my passport was on the way and that the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs had notified the Embassy that I had permission to leave the territory of the Soviet Union

All I now needed was to finish my work on the Party Center at Vorkuta.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

HOMeward BOUND

THE LAST MONTH

May 1 came around with its traditional parade, larger, I thought, and more impressive than the others I had seen. Three days before the holiday, stores had been well stocked with an array of goods rarely seen at other times. Anyone with enough money could take full advantage of the opportunity, and the queues were lengthy. May 1 was bitterly cold, the dying kick of a winter that had seen the temperature in February drop to 65 degrees below zero centigrade. The Army, the schoolchildren, and all the workers' organizations took part in the parade, bearing signs, portraits, and flags; and the ubiquitous red was in startling contrast to the snowy ground.

I was still engaged in what might be termed a war of attrition with the Building Department. It had begun in March when, with the aid of a prisoner, I had completed a huge frieze in half the time allotted. I had filled out my own worksheet and had noted my colleague's labors on the back of his brigade report. The office had decided that I was claiming twice for one piece of work, and at the end of the month I had been paid 800 rubles less than I should have received.

I took up the matter with the Chief Engineer and told him that if he did not believe me he could easily send a Commission to inspect the work. If they found my report was wrong, then I would accept the penalty inflicted upon me. But if the work had been properly done, then I wanted to be paid for it. He did send a Commission which upheld my

claims, but the accountant ignored their findings and, a week before the end of May, I had still not been paid.

Finally I returned to the Chief Engineer who told me that he had ordered the accountant to pay me. I was angry at hearing this and informed the Engineer that the accountant had refused to pay me. If something were not done, I would make an official report to the Director of our Trust. This was a serious step, as both he and I knew. If a workman finds he has been wronged, he can make a protest which brings immediate action from the authorities. According to law, a Committee of Inquiry must be named within 24 hours and sent to look into the dispute, check work-reports and accounts. A decision must be made on the spot and if the worker's claim is upheld, those responsible must be punished. In my case, the Chief Engineer would be held as ultimately responsible. As soon as I had made my threat, he jumped from his desk and went off like a whirlwind to the accountant. I was paid that same day. I blamed myself for having waited so' long before making my claim. Then I went off with my hard-earned money to buy a new suit for my journey home.

On May 30, I went back for the 'nth time to the Militia to see if my passport, which I had sent them for a visa, was ready. I was asked if I had permission to leave my work. I was able to show them the certificate that the reluctant Adam Adamovich Labetski could no longer withhold. "In that case," said the officer, "you can leave whenever you wish. We shall give you a note to that effect and you will receive further instructions."

"That's fine," I answered, "I shall terminate my employment today. But I still need time to pack and generally put my affairs in order."

"Will two days be sufficient?" asked the officer.

"I shall need at least a week," I told him, "because I must sell my furniture and say goodbye to my friends."

“You are a strange man,” was his comment. “When you could not leave, you wanted to go. Now that you are free to go, you are looking for excuses to stay.”

“Well, I’ve waited so long that another week won’t make much difference,” I retorted and the interview closed on that note.

When I went to the Building Office to get my last pay, I got a very pleasant surprise. As a foreigner who belonged to no trade union, I had had a right only to twelve days vacation with pay. That very morning, a government circular had reached the office granting all foreigners the same rights as Russians in regard to paid vacations. That meant a whole month’s pay, and very cheerfully I agreed to come back later when my paycheck would be adjusted in line with the new regulations. When I left the office that evening I had 4000 rubles in my pocket.

THE DAY OF DEPARTURE

The Militia had made arrangements for me to go to Syktyvkar, the capital of the autonomous Republic of Komi, upon which Vorkuta depended. There, they told me, I would be given my passport and an exit visa. I said my last goodbyes, and a driver from the Camp brought me and my French friend to the station. My friend was sad at being the last Frenchman left.

On June 6, at noon, the train left for the south, through a countryside where the snow had disappeared except in some rifts of the tundra. I had quite a few fellow-travelers because it was now vacation time. But everyone of us had a seat and a bunk. In the Soviet Union, given the great distances involved, regulations stipulate that there be no more travelers than there are accommodations for seating and sleeping. This makes traveling pleasant, but sometimes inconvenient. There is only one train a day on the Vorkuta-Moscow line, and sometimes travelers have to wait several days before being able to get a place.

As the train rolled on, I stubbornly kept my eyes glued to the window. For seven years, I had felt starved for the sight of a tree, but now I didn't see any until we reached the Arctic Circle, about 60 miles south of Vorkuta. Even then they were only small, stunted fir trees, but they made me feel happy and I thought of the unconscious joys of those who spend all their lives in scenes of natural beauty. They no more suspect their good fortune than those who are well off can suspect the distress of hungry people.

I was making, in reverse, my journey of 1947. But how differently! Then it had been the depths of winter; now signs of summer were everywhere. Then it had been in a prisoner-car; now it was a comfortable coach. The route to the Camps had now become the way to freedom, and instead of three glasses of water and salt fish there was no scarcity of food. Throughout the train, people went around with their teapots to get some of the boiling water furnished free in all the stations. At the kiosks of the stations one could buy the roasted pumpkin seeds that Russians like so well. My companions nibbled away at them all day long, spitting out the husks in all directions. Sometimes accordion music broke the monotony of the trip.

Then the train passed through thick forests of pines and birch trees. Guarded by soldiers, prisoners were working on the tracks. Now and then we passed sections of embankments thrown up in preparation for another railroad track.

SYKTYVKAR

On June 8, about 2:00 p.m., we arrived at the station of Kniaj-Pogost. A trip forty-eight hours long had cost me only eighty-seven rubles. I had to hire a so-called taxi to drive me, along frightful roads, to Ust-Vim, on the Vytcheoda River, where I took boat for Syktyvkar. For sixteen rubles I had a pleasant trip on the wide and picturesque river. As

we were in the “white nights” period, I got a magnificent view of the entire countryside.

I arrived at Syktyvkar at 6:00 a.m., only to find that the only hotel in town was crowded. I was the eleventh name on the waiting list. So I put my name down, left my baggage, had breakfast and went to take a look at the town.

As soon as the Police Headquarters opened, I went in to get my passport and visa. But I was told that the clerk handling my paperwork was away. I would have to await his return in five or six days. What could I do meanwhile?

I had slim hopes of getting a room at the hotel. But friends in Vorkuta had given me the address of an actor. I decided that it would do no harm to go and see him. He was in the midst of moving and could not give me lodging. However, as soon as he learned that I was French, he told me that one of my compatriots was working for the local Building Department. He gave me directions and I found the man at work, just as I had recently been, making plans for the decoration of a store under construction. I introduced myself and he had exactly the reaction I used to have. He asked me a number of questions, and must have been satisfied with my answers because he invited me to stay with him until my papers came through.

He told me that he had been released from the Camps two years before, had been ordered to live in Syktyvkar, and had been forbidden to communicate with the French Embassy. He had quite a lucrative position, had bought his own wooden house, and had married a woman whose husband had been killed in a road accident three years earlier. He had adopted her three children and was making a new life for himself.

The two children, one aged eight and the other eleven, were extremely polite and well-mannered. The atmosphere of their home was in complete contrast with what I had experienced in the last few years.

The days passed pleasantly in their company. They showed me around their town which was quite small but rather pretty, with its park and river port. We went to a nearby village to visit the wife's relatives. They were Lithuanians, exiled from their home, and they told me that it had been thirteen years since they had seen a priest.

The following Sunday, they all came into town and I was able to celebrate Mass for the whole family on a corner of the dining-room table. The old people went to confession and received the Eucharist. Afterwards, with tears in their eyes, they said to me, "Father, who knows whether we have made the last Communion of our lives? When will we again see a priest in this place?"

Behind the Iron Curtain, tens of millions ask the same anguished question, from the North Pole to the frontiers of India, and from Poland to the China Sea.

ON TO MOSCOW

On June 14, my passport was returned, stamped with an exit visa valid for one month. Rather than return to Kniaj-Pogost and risk waiting several more days for a place on the train, I decided to fly direct to Moscow. For 430 rubles, I booked the first available flight on a little fifteen-seater service plane. At 7:30 a.m., June 16, I took off on the first leg of my journey, filled with memories of the land where I had spent so many years and of the friends I had made there.

We touched down at Kirov and Gorki, where the Oka River joins the majestic Volga. Then we flew over the Kliazma River and the town of Vladimir, landing finally to the southeast of Moscow at 3:00 p.m. I traveled to the city by suburban train and at once took a taxi to the Embassy.

I knew that in order to gain admission I would need clearance from the police on duty outside. Accordingly, I approached the one who

seemed more important and said to him, "Comrade, I am a French citizen. I have my passport and a Soviet exit visa. Now I need transit visas from the Consul. May I see him?"

The officer took my passport and told me to wait. Then he fumbled in his pocket and took out a key and walked toward the Embassy yard. He opened a tiny door and took out a telephone. He asked for orders from the Ministry of the Interior. He came back to me, saluted smartly, handed me my papers and invited me to enter the building.

I was greeted warmly by the Embassy officials who lost no time in announcing my arrival to Father Georges Bissonnette, a fellow Assumptionist who was stationed in Moscow at the time. He came at once and brought me with him to his apartment. During the next three days, while my papers were being processed, we went sightseeing. But I have no intention of adding myself to the list of tourists who have written their impressions of the Soviet capital.

FRONTIER...FINLAND...FREEDOM

At 8:15 p.m., June 19, I took a train bound for Leningrad. The trip was uneventful, but I still retain a fine impression of the town of Vyborg, with its attractive suburbs and country houses. The train stopped often and I had a chance to stroll along the platform. In my car, was a very fat Swede wearing shorts. When he went out, he caused quite a stir. "Look at that foreigner," mumbled an old gossip, "He has no shame. In our country, men would never dress like that."

A few miles further on, I could have made a similar remark, "In my country, we would never isolate a region like this." We were approaching the border, but there were now no more private dwellings. On both sides of us were thick forests, broken here and there by clearings which were surrounded by barbed wire, a last grim reminder of the concentration camps.

For a second and a third time we went through this real, palpable Iron Curtain, as our train slowly passed through this concentration camp area. Meanwhile Customs officers visited each coach. I must confess that I have never been so gently treated in all my life. My luggage was never opened.

The Russian soldiers left the train when we arrived at the first Finnish station. They solemnly saluted us. I shouted out, “Good luck, Comrades,” and I meant it fervently. Letters in a familiar alphabet spelled out the name of the town: Vainikkala. I knew no Finnish, but to me the word meant Freedom.

On the morning of June 21, I was in Helsinki. A French Legation car was waiting for me, but as it was very early I decided to look around the city and the port. This new contact with a non-Soviet world was a revelation to me. I just could not get over the beautifully decorated store windows, the sight of people going freely about their business, dressed according to individual tastes and not in drab conformity.

And the air, full of sea smell, seemed so pure. I could feel the ocean breeze blowing away nightmare memories of Secret Police and their puppets. On my way back to the Legation, I passed a large hotel from which flew the flags of many countries. Among them was the red, white, and blue of France. It was fifteen years since I had seen my country’s flag. It seemed to be waiting especially here for me, on the threshold of freedom. Tears started to roll down my cheeks.

The French Minister and his wife received me most kindly and did everything to ensure that I would be able to leave on the last leg of my journey the next morning. I spent the night with the French Dominican Fathers, and at 7:30 a.m. flew out of the Helsinki airport.

MEDITATION

Up to this point I had just allowed myself to be carried along by the rapid tide of recent events. Now, I sat back and thought of the past and of the future. My eleven years in Russia had certainly strongly marked me.

My feelings were a conflicting mixture of admiration and revulsion: admiration for the work accomplished and the undeniable progress achieved, revulsion for the costs of such progress, revulsion against the enslaving methods which replaced the exploitation of man by man by the exploitation of the man by an anonymous State. Revulsion against a single Party which, not content with limiting the human ideals to a materialism that can be seen and felt, considers it a crime to dare think and and judge in a way at variance with the Party point of view.

I was heart-sick at the omnipotence of the Police and the methods they employed. I questioned the need for so many constraints and controls to coerce citizens into believing themselves happier and more prosperous than any other nation on earth.

All this might only be a mask, a lie, .to hide the preparation for the monstrous enslavement of the whole world, under the pretext of “liberation” and “peace.”

Personal memories kept coming back. After years of captivity, I was returning to my former life of freedom. I ignored most of world events of the past eleven years. I believed that I could stitch my old life and my new one, without adaptation or change.

Still, later on, when I happened to give my impressions of Russia, I often ran up against prejudices, for or against, presented as undeniable, and completely without objectivity.

For some, everything in the Soviet Union was perfect. For others, I was simply a mouthpiece of the Soviets, if I even suggested that the Party had improved the well-being of the country. Their situation is still inferior to ours, but it is far better than it was in the past. Their leaders, for whom truth is a thing of the moment, remain in power only by deceit

and fraud. How can they even mention social justice, when they have exacted the sacrifice of several million human beings? Can social justice be the fruit of so many crimes, lies, and betrayals? Good fruit cannot grow on a rotten tree.

If exterior attitudes and methods have many times changed, we must recognize that for forty years there has not been an iota of change in their basic concept or in their will to extend to the entire world their Socialist and Communist Revolution.

Whatever means they have employed, or whatever improvements they have made, whatever fine achievements they can show us, all these have never greatly benefited the ordinary man. They continue to require the miserable conditions under which millions of us have lived. And we must not forget that all this has a goal the destruction of all that is valued by every man worthy of the name.

Therein lies a danger, a great danger. What will we be able to say to our Western contemporaries when the Iron Curtain is finally lifted? They will see undeniable achievements. But the enslavement of the Camps, the deportations, the blood, tears, and death that have for forty years produced these things will be transformed by a skillful propaganda into the achievements of Soviet youths devoted to a totalitarian Party.

Our only salvation is a return to the Christian principles that gave us our civilization. Christianity and its moral standards are not opposed to material progress; they would demand, however, that it be based on justice and freedom. What does it profit man to gain the whole world if, in doing so, he lose his soul⁹ Humanity itself, enthralled by material progress, runs the risk of forgetting the main principle. How many more sacrifices and how many more victims are needed before we find, amid mud and blood, equilibrium for the World?

If we are satisfied with considering these points with our prejudices, our habits, our selfishness, if we do not give the material and the spiritual

their relative place, if we are content with our veneer of Christianity and civilization, without deepening the moral imperative, then we will, I'm afraid, have a terrible and painful awakening.

EPILOGUE

Between the sky and deep blue sea, lulled by the throbbing of the motors, I let myself think these things. Around eleven o'clock, the stewardess told us to fasten our seat-belts because we were about to land in Copenhagen. Less than an hour later, we took off again, definitely heading for Paris.

As we landed, I spied a group waiting for me, my brother and some Assumptionists. Unable to utter a word, I embraced them all.

It was 2:00 p.m., June 22, and I could not believe my happiness. The next day I left Paris, anxious to see again the one whose faith in my return had never flagged in eleven years despite my silence, and whose trusting daily prayers had buoyed me up amid my wretchedness.

In the evening of June 23, I embraced my dear old mother.

