

yard. Directly in front of the door, black against the snow, stood an open truck with its motor running. The camp commander stood right there, and one by one we approached him. He was making up the roster on the spot. I didn't even try to explain anything to him, seeing his angrily smirking face.

"Ah, and the volunteer is here too? That's nice!" he said.

I climbed silently into the truck after the others. The guards climbed aboard.

We were on our way.



5. MY FIRST ACQUAINTANCE WITH THE MINES

Although November in Magadan is not cold, as I sat in the moving open car I felt sharply that it was no longer summer. I buttoned my topcoat and turned up the collar, but it did not help.

We came out upon the Kolyma Highway, turned right, and drove along the straight ribbon of road leading directly to the high mountain pass in the distance. I looked back at the sleeping city, lit here and there by street lamps, and now receding rapidly.

We crossed the Magadanka River, passed the Auto-Repair Factory, and climbed steeply uphill. It was steadily becoming colder. When we reached the pass an hour later, the cold sharp northern wind which swept us suddenly forced me to lower myself to the floor of the truck, squeezing in among the rest of my comrades in misfortune.

For the last time the lights of Magadan flashed in the distance and vanished. Against the dark sky we could see only the standing figures of our four guards, posted at the corners of the truck with rifles in their hands. They were warmly dressed and not afraid of freezing, but I began to shiver violently and could no longer feel my feet, clad in light shoes.

As soon as we were across the pass, the driver added speed, although the highway lay under a thick layer of snow which had not been cleared away.

The Magadan Sovhoz, where vegetables were grown in hothouses for the higher local officials, flashed past, and the last buildings disappeared from sight. Beyond them the road was totally deserted, except for a rare car going toward the city. According to Kolyma rules, cars and trucks coming from the taiga shut off their headlights and stop, making way for those from Magadan. The road was narrow even in

summer; in winter, when its outlines were marked only by lines of twigs stuck into the snow, there were frequent accidents.

The moon rose. Snow began to fall, and gradually the prisoners huddled in the truck were covered by a thin but fairly solid white blanket. The snow melted a little with our breath, and soon trickles of cold water began to crawl down our collars, sending our spirits even lower. My teeth chattered, and I tried to prevent severe frostbite by moving my feet constantly despite the protests of my neighbors. For my hands I feared less, but I did not want to lose any toes.

It was daylight when we drove into a small settlement. We had reached Atka, which housed the 2nd Auto Base of Dalstroy. It consisted of garages, depots, repair shops and living quarters for the workers and prisoner employees. In the entire village there were less than twenty free employees.

Our truck stopped at the camp club. The guards ordered us to climb out and go into the building.

The club was a large empty room with several benches and a large stove in the middle—a homemade affair made of an empty gasoline barrel. A bright wood fire was burning in the stove, and everyone rushed toward it. My first thought was to remove my shoes and rub my numbed feet to restore circulation. It took fully thirty minutes of effort before the dead numbness gave way to sharp, cutting pain. I was happy that I had saved my feet.

Meantime, dinner had been brought: bread and gruel, still hot, and we greedily swallowed it. There were twenty-five of us. Many were known to me. The group included five or six criminals who were being deported to the taiga for various offenses committed in the Magadan camps.

The political prisoners were being deported as a result of denunciations or for impertinence to authorities. Prostoserdov was one of these. He told me how it had happened. All the prisoners of his barracks had been taken to the baths and there given some of the usual injections. I do not know what bee had bitten Prostoserdov, but he refused point blank to be stuck and was rude to the doctor. When the group returned to the barracks, Prostoserdov was summoned to the camp commander,

who proceeded to lecture him on proper behavior in camp, lamenting the slackening of discipline which led to such deplorable incidents as my attack upon a member of the Young Communist League. Prostoserdov flared up again, saying that if I beat up a Komsomol member, there must have been sufficient provocation for it, and that there were too many scoundrels about who deserved a beating, not only in Magadan but also in Moscow . . . As a result of this outburst, Prostoserdov was led off from the director's office straight to the punitive cell.

As we sat around the stove, this stocky, red-haired man whom ten years of convict labor had failed to correct, smoked a cigarette and with great gusto reviled the entire Soviet government, explaining to me that he now considered himself free from the promise given to Mosevich.

Several Trotskyite "genliners" (followers of the general party line) who belonged to our company sat in glum silence—their unquestioning devotion to Comrade Stalin and the general line of the party had not saved them from deportation to the mines . . .

The chauffeur of the Atka auto-base entered the room to see whether he could do some trade with the men. I immediately offered my new coat, but refused money, demanding some warmer clothing in exchange. The customer took a liking to the coat. He left and soon returned with a sheepskin-lined coat in fairly decent condition. After a short conversation about local affairs, he left. Later, when we had arranged ourselves again in the truck and it began to move, a young fellow came running from around a corner, shouting that I was wearing a stolen coat and demanding its return. Of course, he did not get it back—it warmed me not a whit less for being stolen.

The rest of the trip was somewhat easier. The sheepskin coat was big for me and I managed to sit in such a way that it covered my feet. The high collar saved my ears, and I kept my hands warm by tucking them deep inside the sleeves. Nevertheless, when we arrived in Myakit five hours later and were again taken to the club to warm up, I realized how badly the warmth was needed.

Myakit was far bigger than Atka. It was the seat of the Auto-Transport Administration of the entire Kolyma region. Having some pretensions to importance, it had two or three good wooden buildings, and

the areas between the houses were to some extent cleared of excess snow.

We rested briefly, no more than an hour, and resumed our journey. A heavy snow began to fall, and the wind rose. In the rapidly gathering darkness our truck crawled slowly. The landscape was ever the same—a succession of dreary, low, snow-covered hills on either side of the road, with here and there a sparse growth of trees and stunted brush. At times we drove along hollows—apparently frozen river beds. But now there was nothing to indicate running water, since the Kolyma rivers freeze to the very bottom in winter, and do not always thaw out completely even in summer. While I was still in Magadan, I learned that, except for the strip along the shore, the entire Kolyma soil is frozen to a depth that man has not yet succeeded in measuring. The deepest shafts—from 75 to 100 feet down—passed through solidly frozen earth. In summer the thawing rarely reached deeper than three feet, and where the earth was overgrown with moss, it did not thaw at all.

It was late at night when we arrived in Sporny. Only a few spots along the road from Myakit showed signs of human habitation, and it was not until the outskirts of Sporny that we saw, on the right of the road, indications of mining works: mounds of obviously artificial origin, traces of explosions which soiled large stretches of snow, searchlights throwing their beams across the land, and small groups of people walking along the highway.

We climbed down from the truck and were taken to a special tent assigned to transient prisoners going north. We were soon given supper, but sat up for a long time before going to sleep, trying to get warm after the freezing journey. There was plenty of wood and the fire in the stove burned brightly. At length we lay down on the bare benches along the walls and slept.

We were awakened and started out again when it was still dark. Two hours later, when it began to dawn, I saw ahead of us a small settlement, and beyond it a wide river with steep banks which could only have been the Kolyma River. We stopped at the turnpike, while the leader of

our guards went to find out whether we could continue. We took advantage of the opportunity and clambered out of the truck, stamping about and running back and forth to warm up. The guards were unconcerned, since there was no danger of our escaping—indeed, there was nowhere to go.

The leader returned and told us that although the Kolyma was already frozen, the ice in the middle of the river was still thin and we would therefore have to walk part of the way. I immediately protested, categorically refusing to go any farther unless I was given felt boots. Two other men, who had also been seized in Magadan without adequate clothing, joined me, and the rest supported us. The demand, incidentally, was a legitimate one and in accordance with local rules. Soon one of the guards who had left the group returned with three pairs of old felt boots and we immediately put them on. I stuffed my shoes into the pockets of my sheepskin coat, for any future eventuality.

After a brief discussion, the guards ordered us to get into the truck again and with screeching brakes it crawled down the narrow road and onto the ice-bound Kolyma. A road leading to the left bank was cleared in the thick layer of snow which covered the frozen river, and on either side of it, at intervals, there were holes cut in the ice to gauge its thickness. Dense fog rose from these openings.

Somewhat to the right groups of people were pattering about on the ice. I guessed from certain signs that they were building a bridge over the Kolyma, which was half a mile wide at that spot. There was no mechanical equipment whatever in this work, and it was difficult to understand how these people could work in the water in a frost of 40-45° below zero, Fahrenheit.

Slowly our truck moved down from the bank along the crackling ice. As we approached the middle of the river, this unpleasant crackling became ever louder. Finally, even our imperturbable guards could endure it no longer. They jumped off the truck and ordered the driver to stop while we got out.

We had barely time to stop when there was a deafening crash—the ice broke under the front wheels and the truck, resting on its frame,

began to keel forward. The driver immediately reversed the engine, the wheels whirled backward and the truck slowly began to climb back, its sunken front wheels cutting a swath in the thin ice.

Urged on by the excited guards with leveled rifles, we all clutched at the truck, dragging it back, throwing our own bags and coats under the slipping wheels. Glancing back, I saw another truck which stopped behind us, nearer the shore. I ran to it, spoke briefly to the driver, took a steel-wire rope from him, tied one end of it to the bumper of his car and ran with the other end to ours. The driver's assistant followed me and helped me to tie it to the back of our truck. Then we called to the driver to back up. Picking up our bags, we stepped aside. The steel rope stretched taut, the cracking became louder.

Suddenly, glancing back, I noticed a crevasse forming over a rather large area in the snow and spreading rapidly. "Get back!" I shouted wildly, rushing toward shore. The guards and the prisoners followed me, falling and foundering in the deep snow.

I had barely jumped across the fatal crevasse when the entire floe broke off and began to sink under the water, which rapidly flooded over the snow.

About five of the men, stranded on the huge floe, struggled toward the ice bank, the water already reaching to their waists. The driver's seat of our truck was already submerged, together with the driver who had not managed to jump out in time. Some of the men who had saved themselves ran toward shore, with the guards in the van. Several of us waited on the edge of the intact ice for the rest, who half-walked, half-swam across the breach.

Four of the men succeeded in reaching the shore and we pulled them up to safety. But one unfortunate soon sank and disappeared under the water. The truck was also gone.

Returning to the bank, we walked to the bridge-building site, where several large bonfires were blazing. Still excited over our recent escape, we heatedly discussed the incident. The building workers who were sitting around the fire cleared a space for us, and our four soaked comrades were advised to undress at once. Wrapped in borrowed coats and sheepskins they warmed themselves by the fire while their own clothes

were drying. The guards sat down with us and tried to discover the names of the accident victims. The name of the drowned prisoner—a Trotskyite—was recalled, but no one knew the driver; even the number of the truck escaped anyone's notice. The guards made out a report about the loss of the truck and two men, and began to hurry us on, anxious to get going again. The protests of the soaked men were of no avail. Some of the others tried to support them, but the guards walked away a few steps and leveled their rifles, declaring that we had five minutes to get ready, after which they would open fire.

This argument was irrefutable, and we were obliged to comply.

Stretching out single file and accompanied by the guards, we crossed to the left bank without further mishap, walking along the boards which had been laid over the ice by the bridge builders. We climbed the steep bank, and ten minutes later we were in the small settlement which housed the workers.

We were brought into one of the tents, where we hastened to build a brighter fire, recklessly destroying the supply of firewood piled on the floor. The guards departed somewhere to clear up the question of our further transportation, and our wet and violently shivering comrades had an opportunity to dry out and get warm.

Soon one of the guards returned with four large loaves of bread, which he managed to obtain for us from the camp commander, and told us that an hour and a half later a truck going in our direction would pick us up and take us as far as Yagodnoye, which was farther north. We thanked him for the bread and received the information with utter indifference.

The sole advantage of a prisoner's life consists in his never having to plan or worry about anything; that is what the authorities are for—it is their job to foresee every eventuality in life. When a Kolyma convict is asked what his own opinion is on any matter, he invariably replies: "Why should I worry about it? Let the authorities do the thinking—they read the newspapers, they go to the baths, they talk over the telephone. Let them rack their own brains."

Some two hours later, when it was already quite dark and the frost became sharper, the truck finally came, and soon the village disap-

peared behind us in the snowy distance. We were again alone on the endless ribbon of the same snow-piled road. The only difference between the roads on the right and the left banks of the Kolyma was that the new road was even narrower, worse and more desolate, and that there were no mountains near by. We were driving along the valley of the river Debin, a tributary of the Kolyma which joined it near the place of our crossing.

I sat wrapped in my life-saving sheepskin coat and thinking: just before there were twenty-six of us, excluding the guards—now there are only twenty-four. Only a few hours ago an incident occurred which would shake a normal person for several days. And here the two dead men are already forgotten, no one recalls them any more, everyone is engrossed in his own thoughts and affairs, and all that remains of the event is a small slip of paper—a dozen penciled words—in the pocket of the senior guard. If he does not lose the paper and reports the accident in Magadan, these people will be crossed off the lists of prisoners. If he should lose it, there will be two more dead souls in Kolyma. The families of the victims will never know what happened, and will continue to wait for letters from accursed Kolyma for a long time to come . . .

It took us six hours to reach Yagodnoye, which is no more than some seventy miles from the left bank. Several times our truck foundered in snowdrifts and we had to climb out and pull it back, spurred on by the shouts of the guards. Once, when we were again moving along the narrow gorge of the left bank of the Debin, we skidded on a sharp turn of the slippery road and nearly plunged over the edge. As we pulled the truck back onto the road, laboring up to our waists in snow, I glanced down and momentarily imagined how it would have felt to be plunging into the ravine. The vision left me queasy and depressed.

When the truck was back on the road, we rolled some cigarettes of the eternal makhorka, and I asked the driver whether accidents were frequent at this spot. He shrugged his shoulders with an air of complete indifference and replied: "Who counts them? Sometimes a whole week passes without an accident, and other times there may be five cars flying over the ledge in a single day. In the summer they are collected down

there and taken to Magadan for repairs. But by summer there is not much left of the cars. The passing drivers strip everything—wheels, carburetors, lights, seats, whatever they can carry. It's good enough if the body remains, but usually the body is the first thing to crack up in the fall . . ."

A heavy snow began to fall once more, but soon we saw the lights of Yagodnoye. We drove along its single street, which was, however, wide and well-lit, and turned into the courtyard of the local camp, where we were quickly assigned to one of the tents. Everyone received a bowl of gruel and a mug of hot water with bread; after supper we were ordered to go to sleep. This time we slept like kings, for though there was no linen, our mattresses were clean and stuffed with fresh straw.

I woke early, dressed and went out into the yard. Overnight, the snow had piled up to a depth of at least seven or eight feet, and there were no traces of the road by which we came.

The sun rose and the snow glittered so dazzlingly that it hurt the eyes. Prostoserdov came out of his tent, and we walked down the trodden pathway into the street.

Yagodnoye is one of the best managed settlements in the taiga. It is the seat of the Road-Building Administration, which was headed at the time by Fomin and Zaporozhetz, members of that company of NKVD-men who had been expelled from Leningrad to Kolyma after Kirov's assassination. Yagodnoye owes its gay and pleasant appearance to the energy of these two men. Moreover, the forests surrounding the village have been preserved intact, although as a rule timber is destroyed mercilessly and recklessly in the vicinity of settlements.

We returned to the tent just in time. We were already being summoned by the hoarse shouts of our old friends, the guards, who ordered us to finish our breakfast and get ready to move on. A half-hour later we fell into formation outside the tent and everyone was given a pair of mittens and a wooden shovel. We were told to leave everything behind, except the bag of bread which had been brought from the bakery.

Leaving the camp, we walked to the northern boundary of the village. Where the path ended, we had to clear our own way north. We proceeded at a snail's pace, since only the first two men could work,

while the rest stamped about aimlessly behind them with the useless shovels in their hands. I suggested that several men climb ahead over the unbroken snow and begin work farther on. The guards pounced on my idea and soon our contingent was spread over a good two miles; as the cleared sections were joined, those in the rear moved ahead.

Whether it was the effect of the hard physical effort or the bright sun, but we soon felt hot and threw off our coats and sheepskins, which those in the rear carried forward as the group moved on. Even the guards were caught up in the general spirit of work, and, giving their rifles to one of their number, took up shovels.

The short northern day was already drawing to a close when we heard behind us the whirr of a motor and saw a snowplow which was rapidly catching up with us. It was a welcome relief, for we were thoroughly tired by that time. Stepping aside to make way for the machine, we dined on bread and salted fish, washing both down with snow.

It was somewhat galling, however, that all our work in clearing the seven or eight miles of unnecessary road, which left us barely able to drag our feet, had been for nothing. Our path was quite destroyed by the snowplow, which left instead a wide and rather firmly packed road.

After dinner, we resumed our trek. By sunset, according to my calculations, we had walked close to 12 miles since leaving Yagodnoye. We hoped to reach our destination that night along the cleared road, when we suddenly caught sight of the returning snowplow, which was widening the already cleared road. The driver told us that the road was cleared only for another mile and a half, and that, if the machine did not break down, he would resume work the next day.

Soon we came to the end of the road, and, under strict orders of the guards, again took up the shovels. As darkness gathered, our convoy became ever more gloomy and their shouts ever more vicious, but the work no longer went on as energetically as it had in the morning.

It became altogether dark. Stars shone in the clear sky and luminous, quivering threads stretched from horizon to zenith—reflections of the northern lights.

In this vague and strangely irritating light, we continued to poke the snow with utterly exhausted hands. My system had long been aban-

doned, for now blows of fist or even rifle butt could not force the men to climb into the deep snow.

Finally, I talked the situation over with a couple of my fellow travelers, and we volunteered to climb ahead, for which we received immediate permission. Straining the remnant of our strength, we struggled forward to overtake the rest, helping each other, trying to walk in one another's footsteps and ignoring the fact that our felt boots were filled to the top with snow. When we were about two miles ahead of the column, we stopped, panting for breath. Then, according to our plan, one man began to clear a path forward, and the rest climbed uphill to gather the sticks of brushwood which protruded above the snow—leftovers from recent woodcutting operations in the area. Fortunately, we soon discovered under the snow a whole stack of cut wood, and by the time the rest of the contingent reached us, in a cleared area at the side of the road, a huge bonfire was blazing.

Our psychological stratagem proved successful. Long realizing the senselessness of our work and forcing us to move forward for no reason but sheer obstinacy, the guards would never have permitted us to build a fire had we asked them. Now, however, faced by the accomplished fact, they relented and declared the end of the work-day.

It was almost midnight . . .

The men literally dropped upon the snow with fatigue. We shared the remnants of the bread we had received in Yagodnoye. Someone was found to own a tin can in which we immediately set to boil the simple Kolyma tea—a brew of nothing but snow. The guards also ate—white bread, sausage, and cheese, washing it all down with vodka from hip-flasks.

We sat around the huge fire. The side of the body facing the fire was roasted, while the rest froze. But the men fell asleep sitting and lying around the fire, insensible to the discomfort.

By morning it was snowing again and became somewhat warmer. Several volunteers—and such are always found, odd people!—had kept the fire going all night. The guards also slept. Had we wished to, we could easily have disarmed and killed them and regarded ourselves free. But such a wild thought never occurred to anyone: the geographic

situation of the Kolyma camp, the snows and the forests, and, in summer, the impassable swamps, were the best of guards. There were remarkably few cases in the history of Kolyma when some incorrigible adventurer decided to escape, hoping to cross, without any means of transportation, the desolate and trackless region which stretched for nearly two thousand miles between Kolyma and the rest of Russia.

When dawn began to break, the guards awoke and roused us. Furious at the unforeseen delay, they scattered the fire and forced us to resume our laborious trek.

Although our rest had been insufficient, we were feeling better in the morning, and the work was soon going full blast. By sunrise, two hours or so later, we had moved forward about two miles, despite the protests of our hungry stomachs. I do not know how far we would have gotten at that pace, but soon the situation was saved by the snowplow which had again caught up with us. Allowing it to overtake us, we followed it with quickened steps along the cleared road.

The sun was already beginning to set when we came to the Partisan mining works. One of the guards ran to the village while we trudged ahead. It was becoming more and more difficult to walk, and, as ill luck would have it, there was not a single truck going our way. The road rose again uphill.

Soon the guard who had gone to the settlement caught up with us. He had procured some vodka and a good meal for himself and his colleagues, and had even remembered to bring a large loaf of bread for us. At the next pass we sat down to rest on the snow, before it became completely dark, and quickly swallowed the thin slices of bread which fell to our share in the division of the loaf. Washing down our dinner with snow, we enviously watched the vodka gurgling down the throats of our guards.

After the brief rest, we walked down the hill and continued for several hours more. It was pitch dark when we finally saw the lights of some settlement in the distance. I do not know where we drew energy after the hungry and almost uninterrupted trek of two days, but this last mile we walked with quickened steps.

We entered the street of a small village, turned right somewhere, and,

crossing between dark buildings to the next street, approached a long one-story house lit by an electric bulb over the entrance.

The guard knocked, but there was no answer. Then with a violent tug at the door he broke the latch and we entered. It was the building of the Allocation Office of the Northern Mining Administration. In the middle of the room, between the tables, a stove was burning brightly, and in the corner on a bench a watchman was fast asleep, his coat serving as pillow and mattress. The chief guard woke him rudely and ordered him to guard us until morning, after which the convoy departed.

Piling up our quite useless shovels in a corner, we quickly undressed, for the first time since the beginning of the trip. Every bone in my body ached, my stomach seemed contracted from hunger, and I felt near collapse from the fatigue of the preceding days. Even Prostoserdov was subdued. We arranged ourselves around the stove.

After brief negotiations with the watchman, I exchanged the shoes which I had carried with me since our departure from the left bank for a large chunk of bread and a package of makhorka. I roused Prostoserdov and we replenished our strength. Afterward, warmed and happy, we fell asleep till morning.

The watchman woke us a half-hour before the beginning of office hours. We rose, still aching all over after our journey, washed ourselves somehow, and set out to wait for further developments.

When the employees assembled and the chief arrived, our head guard handed him the list of our names and the bundles of our documents, awaiting further orders. The decision was soon made, but we were not told about it.

Four new guards conducted us across the village in a northeasterly direction.

The settlement, called Camp Khattynakh, was the center of the largest mining district, the so-called Northern Mining Industry Administration. The nearest mine—the Vodopyanov—was only half a mile away, on the other side of the defile. Our way, however, was more distant. Crossing to the side of the mines, laboriously climbing the narrow footpaths across the torn-up earth, we passed the mine and followed the road cleared in the snow.

After more than an hour's walk, we came to another mine and soon learned its name as well, since its entrance was graced, according to camp custom, with a wooden arch bearing the legend: WELCOME TO LOWER KHATTYNAKH.

When we reached the top of the hill, we saw the camp itself—a small settlement of the usual tent type, with a mess hall and bakery in the center. A small distance away was a group of log cabins, apparently the dwellings of free employees.

In the "URB" (the camp's allocation office) tent we were delivered to the camp commander, who signed a receipt for us, and the guards left.

For about an hour we stood at the barrier while the commander studied our documents. It was apparent that he was a man of doubtful literacy, since he asked an elderly assistant in a sweater who sat next to him to read for him both the written papers and the typewritten ones.

Finally, calling out by name all the political prisoners, he led us to a small empty tent near by.

Soon there was a whistle, and the camp "elder" (*Starosta*) conveyed us to the kitchen-mess hall, a large, filthy, steam-filled room where we received bread and a bad, typically camp-style dinner. We were ending our meal when the dining-room began to fill up with the workers from the mines. Postponing acquaintance, I returned to our tent, accompanied by Prostoserdov and several Trotskyites.

We lay down on the cots and smoked makhorka cigarettes, discussing the situation. The general impression produced by local conditions was very depressing, even if it were not for its striking contrast with life in Magadan. The mine was small, the authorities stupid—that was always worse—as we had seen in the "URB," there was dirt everywhere, the tents, ice-crusting even inside, were cold, and the food in the dining-room was vile. All this promised no good. Here there were no longer any illusions. This was real *katorga*—penal exile to hard labor.

We knew that in winter the working day in the mines was nine hours. This meant getting up and going to sleep in the dark, since the

northern day was not much longer than four hours. As for work in the mines, we knew what it meant—digging in the pits with pick and shovel.

True, there was better work, too—preparing lumber and firewood, cleaning the camp, clearing roads, and so forth. After careful consideration, we decided to demand assignment to such work and to refuse to go into the pit. Soon we fell asleep and slept until our tentmates, old-time camp inmates, returned from work. They were all known as Trotskyites, although they included one anarchist—the first living one I ever saw—a couple of traitors to the homeland, one Socialist-Revolutionary, and several others.

What they told us about conditions of work in the pits merely confirmed our decision—the mine was considered the worst in the Northern Administration and was maintained on a punitive status. The workers were always accompanied by several guards, who were free to beat up at will those who in their opinion were lagging at work.

The mine director, Sedykh, was an habitual drunkard. No one had ever seen him sober. The camp commander was a fool, and fond of pushing in the prisoners' teeth. In the kitchen there was endless thieving and the prisoners' rations were plundered mercilessly. The prisoners were cheated and tricked out of their wages by various means, so that they seldom received more than 200-250 rubles, the rest of the money being appropriated by the administration which submitted falsified reports. In short, the picture was clear and very unpromising.

On the following morning, when the whistle blew, we remained in bed instead of going to roll call. Through a small window we saw the entire camp population form into ranks and the commander delivering a speech.

Suddenly our door flew open and the camp elder entered with his assistant:

"Why are you not at roll call?" he asked in a raised voice.

"We want to know first where we are going to be sent to work," replied Bocharov, one of our men.

"Where? Where do you think you are? Are you playing the fool? Isn't it clear what work you have to do here?"

"All right, my friend," answered Bocharov, "we won't waste time in speaking to you. Let the commander come . . ."

"The commander will come, but look out, it will be worse for you. Those who do not come out at once will have to answer for it." He threw out the threat as he left.

Our group began to stir. One after another the "genliners" got up, dressed silently and went out. Only six or seven men remained. I awaited the next developments with interest.

After the assembled prisoners filed out of the prison gates, a half-hour later, our door opened again to admit the camp commander, attended by a numerous suite of camp "foolers." "Foolers" is the collective nickname of the entire camp staff, usually drawn from among privileged prisoners. The nickname derives from the word "fooling around," as opposed to "toiling." A "fooler" is the opposite of a "toiler."

And so, our tent was filled with various officials, beginning with the camp commander and the elder, and ending with all the other idlers, seekers for a little excitement. It was obvious that concerted group refusal to work in the mine was a novelty in the camp.

When the commander entered we rose from the cots and stood before him. From the very small height of his short stature, his arms akimbo, the commander gave us a devastating look which, however, did not make our hearts skip any beats.

"So these are the refusers?" he asked, without addressing anyone in particular. The elder jumped to his side:

"Yes sir, Citizen Commander, these Trotskyites refused to . . ."

"Why?!" The commander turned with a menacing frown, to Prostoserdov, who stood at the end of the group.

"With your permission, Citizen Commander, we are all educated men, unaccustomed to hard physical labor, and we therefore request to be sent to some easier work." The irony of Prostoserdov's reply escaped the commander, who said:

"We have no other work at present . . ."

"We can wait . . ." Prostoserdov gladly interrupted him. The latter again failed to perceive the irony.

"Here everybody must work. And every day. Education is no hindrance to work in the mine. Our mine is small, but we have eighteen professors here, not counting the engineers and doctors—all working in the pits. Only invalids are sent to the woods. Are you an invalid?" he asked Prostoserdov in a business-like manner.

"No, but if I go into the mine I'll surely become one. That is why I am asking for something else . . ."

"I see you are simply a loafer!!" the commander exclaimed and turned to the next man.

"Why are you not at work?"

"I do not feel well . . ."

"Did you go to the infirmary? Where is your certificate?"

"They gave me no certificate . . ."

"Another loafer! And you?" he turned to me.

"Citizen Commander, I request to be assigned according to my specialty," I replied, not a bit daunted by his angry tone.

"We have no other specialties here except that of miner. I see you are all loafers here. And this is my final word to you: I give you five minutes to dress and go to work. Those who do not comply will go to the punitive cell on a hungry ration. I'll show you . . ." He concluded with an eloquent oath, turning and striding out of the tent. The "foolers" filed out after him.

A brief discussion of the situation made it clear that three of us—Bocharov, Prostoserdov and I—were the only ones determined to persist in refusing to work in the mine. The rest dressed hastily and left. Bocharov, a tall man, middle-aged but still strong, a miner from the Don Basin and a party member since 1916, declared: "They can crush me, they can do whatever they please to me, but I will not work on this 'katorga.' I fought throughout the whole civil war, I was captured by the Whites and put to every possible torture, but I've never yet suffered such indignity. And I never was a Trotskyite. They foisted this on me only because I spoke a few heated words to the Secretary of our Party Committee. They tortured me at the investigation, though I have never

committed any crime, and sent me to concentration camp for five years. And now I am expected to work for that scum! Never in my life!"

The door opened, letting in a tall guard wearing a sheepskin coat and carrying a rifle.

"Well, how many of you are left here? Three? Come on, then, get ready with your belongings. We'll go to the punishment cell!" he ordered cheerfully.

"Don't you come on us, you bastard! We are not going anywhere!" Bosharov shouted angrily.

"We like it here well enough," I added.

The guard was obviously taken aback, but he did not lose his equanimity and leveled his rifle at Prostoserdov.

"Get ready, quick, or I'll shoot!"

"Go on and shoot,!" Prostoserdov swore at him. "They won't pat you on the head for that either . . ."

Apparently the guard knew this as well as we did.

"So you will not come of your own will?"

"No!" we replied in chorus.

"All right!" he said threateningly, and fired two shots into the ceiling. The tent filled with thin smoke.

Almost immediately the shots attracted eight other guards, led by a squad commander, a little pockmarked man. Our guard jumped to attention before his superior.

"Permit me to report, Comrade Commander, these Trotskyites refuse to go to the punishment cell, and they are swearing, too . . ."

"Go on, take them all! Put down your rifles!" the squad commander ordered.

The guards leaned their rifles against the wall and energetically threw themselves upon us.

A few minutes later we were lying on the floor, tied hand and foot by the soldiers' belts. Then each of us was carried out of the tent by two or three guards, assisted by some "foolers" attracted by the noise. We were dragged somewhere to the side, toward the hill. This was the first time in my adult life that I was carried, and, though it was done quite carelessly, I must confess that it was not altogether unpleasant.

Soon we were brought before a small cabin. There we were dropped on the snow and untied. Meantime, a guard unlocked the door and the others dragged us inside one by one. As we were pushed into a small side cell, each of us received a stiff blow on the back of the neck in parting. However, Bocharov managed to give a solid punch in the jaw to the camp elder who happened to be within arm's reach.

The cell was extremely uninviting: a tiny barred window high in the wall, a continuous bench of unhewn planks along the wall, an iron stove. An electric bulb in the corridor outside shed some light into our cell through a hole cut in one of the walls. It was dirty and cold.

My comrades swore incessantly. Prostoserdov built a fire in the stove with some of the wood that was piled on the floor, but the temperature in the cell was scarcely affected. The punishment hut was poorly built and the walls failed to retain warmth. And outside there was a frost of at least 40 below, to judge by the thick cold mist which limited visibility to about twenty yards.

When we calmed down a little, we decided that the best thing in our situation was to declare a hunger strike. We knew that, under prevailing regulations, hunger strikers were removed from the jurisdiction of the camp and placed directly under that of the local NKVD, and we felt that we had nothing to lose from such a change. Accordingly, when the punitive ration was brought in, a couple of hours later—prisoners in the punishment cell are allowed a half-pound of bread and a bowl of wretched soup daily—we refused to accept it and, obtaining a sheet of paper from the guard, wrote a declaration of hunger strike. The guard shrugged his shoulders, brought more wood, and left.

Hours went by, but we were not bored. My companions were interesting men, especially Bocharov who had seen much and was full of stories about various party affairs, so that time passed quickly in friendly conversation. Bocharov had been under a shadow of disfavor for some time before his arrest and worked as an ordinary miner despite his long party experience. But until 1934, he was always engaged in leading party work, both in Donbas and in Moscow.

One day passed, then another. On the third morning visitors came to our tiny cell—seven or eight of them, headed by a short blond man

in a fur coat whose walk was unsteady. Obviously, he was drunk. As we learned later, it was Sedykh himself, the director of the mine. He was followed by the camp commander and his assistant, our old acquaintance Brukhnov. A fat elderly woman about whom we had also heard before, Nina Petrovna, the local representative of the NKVD was also on hand. Then the little pockmarked commander of the guards showed up, along with some others.

Rocking slightly, Sedykh addressed us:

"So you are the men who refuse to work?"

"We don't refuse to work, we merely request to be assigned to other jobs, and not to the mine," Bocharov answered for the group.

"Are you Trotskyites?"

"No, we are not Trotskyites . . ."

"Crooks? Why did you not say so before?" Sedykh turned to the camp commander, who hastened to explain:

"They are not Trotskyites, just general *contras* (counterrevolutionaries), equivalent to Trotskyites."

"Oh, so that's it . . ." Sedykh drawled. "Now I see. Well, my friends, for Trotskyites and others of their ilk the law prescribes only one kind of work—in the pits. So you had better cease your hunger strike and go to work. Remember what the great Stalin teaches us: In the USSR work is a matter of honor and heroism." He concluded with a resounding hiccup. Then the fat carcass of Nina Petrovna came forward, wafting a strong odor of vodka. Her beady little eyes rolled about in her pasty face as she declared:

"You will also remember that a hunger strike is in itself a counter-revolutionary act and that you may suffer grave consequences, including a lengthened term."

At this Prostoserdov spoke up:

"Don't try to scare us, citizeness. We've been threatened before. I've seen more officials in my day than you have seen prisoners. You were told that we refuse to go into the mine, and if we croak of the hunger strike, you'll be answerable. See?"

Nina Petrovna's eyelids flapped somewhat helplessly. It was said that this woman had been a partisan and after the civil war had made quite

a name for herself by her work for the GPU-NKVD. But she was ruined by her passion for the bottle. Only in the camp was she able to freely satisfy her cravings. Unaccustomed to being addressed in such a tone, she was taken slightly aback. She answered:

"Oh, so that's the kind you are? In that case there's no sense in talking to you. I'll send a report to Khattynakh, and let them decide what is to be done about you."

The drunken Sedykh again attempted to persuade us to go to work, but without success, and they soon left.

Another day passed, and we entered the fourth day of our hunger strike. We were beginning to feel quite weak. The camp's male nurse came to examine us, and an hour later Brukhnov came and declared that, under orders from Sedykh, we would be assigned to the work of cleaning the camp instead of the mine, and that we might therefore end our hunger strike. He added that we were granted three days for recuperation.

With lighter hearts we left the punishment cell, for we were not at all happy about the prospect of ending our days ingloriously in that accursed hole.

In the camp we received special rations to restore our strength: a little butter, several cans of evaporated milk and a loaf of white bread. We returned to the Trotskyite tent. When our tentmates returned in the evening from their work, they showered us with questions; after they learned the results of our sojourn in the punishment cell, the hypocritical sympathy of the "genliners" gave way to unconcealed envy.

On the following morning I went to the infirmary to see my old acquaintance, the male nurse, and to complain about the constantly increasing pains in my chest—the result of the tuberculosis that I had contracted in prison. He turned out to be a once prominent professor of a Moscow clinic and had been exiled to camp for telling anti-Soviet anecdotes. He decided that I needed an X-ray examination, for which I had to go to a larger mining settlement, the Vodopyanov, which we had passed on our way from Khattynakh to Lower Khattynakh. He gave me a pass, and the next morning I was walking along the snowy road on my way to Vodopyanov, accompanied by a guard.

When we arrived, the guard left me at the door of the hospital and vanished, apparently to look up some friends, instructing me to meet him at the same place at 5 P.M. It turned out that the X-ray laboratory had been closed for several days, as the roentgenologist was himself in the hospital, recovering from one of his periodic drinking bouts.

Having several hours at my disposal, I decided to take a walk across the valley to Khattynakh, the seat of the administration of the northern group of mines, and try my luck in obtaining a transfer from our mine to some other place.

Following the familiar path, nearly breaking my legs among the heaps of turned-up frozen earth, I made my way across the mining area and entered the settlement. My first thought was to find the local building organization.

Inquiring of passers-by, I soon came to a small tent, the entrance to which was graced by a double sign: DEPARTMENT OF CAPITAL CONSTRUCTION—COMMANDATURA OF CAMP KHATTYNAKH. Inside, the tent was divided into two sections by a thin plywood partition. I entered the left half where, at four tables, I saw four men who were bending over some plans and other papers. Over one of the tables was a sign: CHIEF OF THE CAPITAL CONSTRUCTION DEPARTMENT. It was to him that I addressed myself, with due humility.

In a few words I told him my story. It immediately transpired that we had mutual acquaintances in Magadan. The chief, Sukhanov, was still a very young man. He listened to me with great sympathy, asked what I could do, and finally said goodbye, promising to effect my transfer from Lower Khattynakh.

At the appointed time I was back at the Vodopyanov Hospital, but I had to wait for a long time before my escort finally appeared. On the return trip I was obliged both to support him and to carry his rifle, for he had so thoroughly filled himself with liquor that he was barely able to walk.

The other two days of our recuperation period passed without further incident, and on the third day, when the whistle called the camp's population to work, we all dressed and went out to morning roll call.

We stood somewhat apart from the others, waiting to be assigned

to one of the brigades. Catching sight of us, the camp commandant, Brukhnov, who was in charge of roll call, said something to one of his retinue who approached us with orders to join the brigade standing in the formation nearest to us.

We immediately made inquiries of some members of the brigade and, finding that they were miners, again stepped aside. This provoked a scandal. Brukhnov flew at us, shouting:

"Why did you leave the brigade you were assigned to?"

"Because you yourself told us that Sedykh ordered our assignment to camp chores," Bocharov answered reasonably.

"I am master here!" little Brukhnov roared and blustered. "I make assignments wherever I please. If I wanted to send you to kitchen duty yesterday, I would have done so, and if I want to send you into the pits today, you'll go into the pits!"

"Don't try such jokes with us, now," Prostoserdov suddenly raised his voice. "You can fool around with the others, but we've said once that we are not going to work in the pits, and that's how it stands. It will be our way, not yours. Understand?"

"Oh, so that's how you talk!" Brukhnov hissed through his teeth. "Then I'll show you a thing or two. Hey, guards, come here!" he shouted. Several guards came running.

"Take these counterrevolutionaries to the *kartsar* (punishment cell), on hunger rations," he ordered madly rolling his eyes and assuming the pose of Napoleon at Austerlitz. "They are to be kept under the strictest regime! I'll rot them in the punishment cell, I'll teach them how the Soviet government fights saboteurs."

Again we were dragged off to the punishment cell. Although this incident might have jeopardized my future transfer to Khattynakh and it would have been more prudent to go into the wretched pits until the order came through, I nevertheless joined Bocharov and Prostoserdov, both because of a feeling of solidarity and because my pride, not yet completely destroyed by the two years in prison and camp, rebelled against the arbitrary tactics of that hooligan Brukhnov.

Ten minutes later we were in our old cell. My companions, heedless of the niceties of expression, energetically swore at Brukhnov, at the

camp system, and at the "Iron People's Commissar," as the current chief of the NKVD, Yagoda, was officially called. Neither did they spare Stalin himself—the ideological inspirer and founder of the penal method of governing Russia.

It goes without saying that we resumed the hunger strike interrupted three days earlier, telling the guard who brought our dinner to go to hell.

This time, infuriated at our disobedience, Brukhnov apparently decided not to confine himself to keeping us in the cold and dirty punishment cell, but devised a new method of annoying us.

On the following day the door of our cell was flung open and the pockmarked chief of the guards entered quite drunk and carrying a revolver, and followed by three other guards.

"Hey there, get up! We are going to search you now," he declared.

Properly speaking, there was nothing for which to search or find, but as a matter of principle we decided not to allow those scoundrels to frisk our pockets.

"Go to the devil, all of you!" cried Prostoserdov. "We are hunger striking, and you have no right to enter at all!"

"We'll soon show you our rights!" squealed one of the soldiers. "Grab them, men, and search them!"

The guards advanced with outstretched arms. Then I seized a log of wood lying near the stove. With one blow I turned over the burning stove, with another I shattered the window. The glass splintered with a ringing sound, and the cell became filled with suffocating smoke. Apparently somewhat cowed, the pockmarked chief opened fire—true, not at us, but at the broken window. The other guards stopped hesitantly, and we jumped up on the sleeping bench, preparing to resist all onslaughts.

Emptying seven cartridges, the chief of the guards seemed to have found new inspiration, and, with the cry, "Forward, boys, get them!" he threw himself into attack.

I dropped almost at once, felled by a blow on the head. What followed escaped my consciousness. When I came to I saw that we were

once more alone; Bocharov and Prostoserdov were groaning and rubbing their welts and bruises, and the fierce Kolyma frost filled our cell through the broken window.

It had been simple to knock out the window in a fit of just indignation in the heat of battle. But now, when the excitement had subsided, the frost was no joking matter. It is true that the stove was back in its place, set up by the guards, and there was even enough firewood, but after briefly talking over the situation, we came to the conclusion that in addition to the voluntarily assumed pangs of hunger, we must also endure torture by frost. Therefore, wrapping ourselves closely into our quilted coats and gathering up our feet, we sat down on the bench and began to wait for further developments.

Soon the guard on duty looked in through the peephole in the door and saw that the fire was out. He came in and lit it again. As soon as he left, I picked up a jug with half-frozen water, broke the crust of ice and poured the water into the stove. The guard who watched the proceeding, entered again and relit the stove once more. Since there was no more water, I pulled out the burning logs with my hands and threw them out of the broken window, where they sank into the snow with a loud hissing.

This somewhat baffled the guard. Some time later we saw that the broken window was being boarded up from the outside with a piece of plywood that was nailed securely to the frame. After this, the patient guard, still silent, again lit the stove and began to watch us. I talked it over with my companions, then pulled up the iron chimney, stuffed my mitten into it, and replaced it on the stove. The cell immediately filled with smoke and the fire went out for lack of a draught.

The nonplused guard ran out and fired three shots to call the patrol leader. A few minutes later we heard the following conversation:

"Comrade Commander, these Trotskyites want to freeze to death . . ." And he told the whole story.

"To the devil with them, pay no attention!" his superior answered.

"I am afraid we'll be called to account for it, Comrade Commander. They must be people with connections, or they would not have so much

nerve. A Trotskyite—he is always quiet, but these are like madmen. You know, today a man is a Trotskyite, tomorrow he may be a director of a trust . . .”

The rest was inaudible.

The stove did not burn any more, the cooled smoke made our eyes smart, we felt depressed, hungry and miserable. Towards night it became colder. We could not fall asleep. Sitting in the corner, I heard Prostoserdov's teeth chatter.

Throughout the following morning the guard did not move away from the peephole in the door, watching us constantly. Then he entered the cell. It was yesterday's guard—he had again returned to sentry duty. Sitting down on the edge of the bench, he began to speak to us in a conciliatory, persuasive tone:

“Say, fellows, why raise all this fuss? You are knocking yourself out for nothing—they have the power and you won't get anywhere. There is nothing but scum all around nowadays, all these NKVD men, one scoundrel worse than the next. Give up your hunger strike and go into the pits. Do you know how to stall? Just pretend you are working, but take it easy, save your strength. And so, easily, quietly, your term will be up before you know it. Why torture yourself . . .”

Prostoserdov answered him:

“You don't understand, my friend. They are all scoundrels, and if they want to, they'll drive anyone to the grave. But that is not the point. The trouble is not with the camp authorities, but with the whole Soviet system which destroys innocent people . . .” And Prostoserdov proceeded to speak of all the things which I knew long ago, but which this simple fellow heard for the first time. He began to glance over his shoulder at the door more and more often, and finally rose and left without a word, closing the door behind him.

In the evening my old friend, the male nurse, came to our cell, accompanied by Nina Petrovna, representative of the NKVD. We sat motionless, numb and stiff with the cold. Nina Petrovna asked something, but Bocharov only swore. After a short discussion, carried on in whispers, they left.

Fifteen minutes later, our friendly guard re-entered the cell, and,

with a happy face, announced that we were free to return to our tent and that our punishment was unconditionally revoked. He inquired whether we were able to walk by ourselves, and, reassured, he let us out.

We returned to our tent in such a condition that the others stared at us as if we were ghosts—bearded, incredibly filthy, black with soot, emaciated, we could easily have frightened any nervous man.

Without answering their questions, we stretched out on the cots and finally after warming up a bit, fell asleep.

In the morning we were brought reinforced rations—the same dairy diet—and were told by the camp *starosta*, who spoke with eyes carefully averted to avoid looking at us, that we could go to the baths if we wished to. This was most attractive to us. In the bathhouse we learned that it had been heated almost especially for us. Shaven, clean, and feeling much better we returned, unable to stop wondering at the miraculous happenings.

Finally, the riddle was solved. I was called to the URB and told that an order had come from the administration with strict instructions to send me immediately to the “center,” and that Brukhnov had already written in reply that I was slightly ill and would be brought there in two days.

Apparently past experience had led the local authorities to fear that, once in the administration, I might cause them unpleasantness, which, of course, was quite possible, since at that time there were many prisoners in responsible posts. Besides, unaware of my illegal visit to Khattynakh and knowing that I had come directly from the capital, Magadan, they could easily have supposed that I had powerful protectors.

As a result, during my last days at the mine, the administration treated us with the utmost consideration and attention possible under camp conditions. My friends received personal assurances from Sedykh himself that he would find them “warm spots.” Nina Petrovna urged me in the friendliest manner to forget bygones, and assured me that the guard commander who had searched us in the punishment cell had already been severely reprimanded for this indiscretion.

Sincerely, though with a gratifying sense of my own superiority, I

promised her to do nothing against the local officials. And indeed, even had I found the opportunity to revenge myself on my oppressors, I would not have done so, knowing that this would merely create for me new enemies, which is always a dangerous situation for a prisoner.

In conclusion, we were given complete new outfits, and a couple of days later, warmly dressed and wearing new felt boots, I was already entering Khattynakh, where I was to spend the next period of my imprisonment.



6. IN CAMP KHATTYNAKH

On arrival in Camp Khattynakh, I was sent to the local "lager" (camp), the usual group of heated tents situated somewhat apart from the free settlement.

I was pleased that the lager seemed to be almost a part of the settlement, without a sign of fences or guards. It housed prisoners, employees of the administration and the commandatura of the village, and workers who supplied Khattynakh with wood and water. In accordance with Kolyma custom, the latter was brought in its dry form in bags. Several dozen men with long picks were always working on the ice of the small river which divided Khattynakh from Vodopyanov. These were the local version of an artesian well.

On the morning following my arrival, I reported at the Building Section, where I was greeted warmly by the prisoner employees, benevolently by the free employees, and somewhat officially by the department head, Sukhanov. I received an immediate appointment to the brigade of carpenters engaged in the construction of a wooden building for the printing shop of the local newspaper.

I was a brigadier. The work was simple, and the workers amiable. The foreman, Kruglikov, was a very decent man despite his past as a bandit, or perhaps because of it.

We worked only eight hours a day, without overstraining ourselves; no one drove us, and we smoked and rested to our hearts' content. Nevertheless, the work proceeded efficiently, and our earnings for the first month exceeded five hundred rubles.

The tent which housed only the workers and employees of the Building Section was warm, even clean according to camp standards. The traditional card games were not too much in evidence. Moreover, there was almost no thieving, which was also a sign of the respectability of the population.