VORKUTA

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HENRY HOLT AND COMPANY • New York

FIRST EDITION

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 55-5955

Printed in the United States of America

87743-0115

Note

1. There is frequent mention in this book of the NKVD. These initials denote the Soviet Secret Police, which was founded in 1918 by Dzerzhinsky as the *Cheka*. Since then it has changed its name many times. It was subsequently known as the OGPU, the NKVD, the MVD, and the MGB. The latest variation is the SGB. The machinery of all these organizations has been the same. Because the prisoners in the camps at Vorkuta always speak of the NKVD, this is the term which has been retained for this book.

2. The reader will find a small number of Russian words in the text, spelled in the English alphabet and with the appropriate stress accented. The Russian has been kept in these cases because, without it, it has seemed impossible to convey a true idea of the atmosphere of the camps at Vorkuta, where all prisoners, whatever their own language, use the Russian word for certain features of everyday life. Each Russian word is accompanied by the English translation the first time it appears, but not always repeated afterward. Should the reader have forgotten the translation of the word the next time he meets it, he can refer to the list of Russian words at the end of the book.

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The Fate of the Jews

ONE morning two prisoners who had only come out of quarantine the day before were allotted to our brigade. We nosed cautiously around them. They had been arrested the previous summer and had only recently been sentenced, each to twenty-five years.

One of them was a Ukrainian from near Kiev and his countrymen gathered round him at once. He had lived on a large collective farm there. When the Germans occupied the Ukraine in 1941, they had arrested him because he was a member of the Communist Party. It had soon turned out that he was a perfectly harmless citizen. He was made to sign a declaration of loyalty and then sent home. There was nothing special about that. At that time a large number of people were arrested as suspects and then released again as soon as it was clear that there was nothing suspicious about them.

Almost ten years later, in 1950, all Soviet citizens who had been arrested during the German occupation and then released again were rearrested by the Soviets. Our Ukrainian said that they had all been sentenced to twenty-five years' hard labor.

The other prisoner was an undersized little man of about sixty with an impressive placid face. Like all newcomers he

was quite inexperienced in the ways of the camp and obviously completely helpless. When the tools were given out he made no attempt to get himself a good one, and as we marched off he was in possession of the worst shovel in the whole store. He didn't carry it on his shoulder as the others did but in his hand. It was quite clear that he had never carried a shovel before in his life, let alone worked with one.

The brigade leader allotted the work. Four of us were sent to load up rubble behind the bathhouse and pull it across on little sledges to the site where a new block was being built.

The old man began shoveling. He had plenty of good will but he had never used a shovel before in his life. His partner, Dazuk, a Ukrainian, laughed at him: "Look at the way the Jew works!"

He was anti-Semitic, like most of the Ukrainians, though not one of the pogrom heroes who like to boast openly about the number of Jews they have shot.

"Let me take him," I said to Dazuk. "You can have my Lithuanian."

The Lithuanian was a better worker. Dazuk was quite agreeable. I said to the old man in Russian, "You come over to me and we'll work together."

"By all means."

We loaded up our barrel full of rubble and dragged the sledge slowly up the slope to the building site.

"Are you ill?"

"I've got a bad heart."

We tipped the barrel out and I pushed the sledge into a corner. We went into block No. 31 where a friend of mine was working as a stoker.

"Got any tea?"

He gave us two mugs full. The old man pulled a little purse out of his pocket.

"Will you have some sugar?" he said.

I still had a piece of bread left. He didn't like taking the bread, but accepted it in the end. After a while he asked warily, "Are you a Latvian?"

"No, a German."

He was visibly shocked. I knew what he was thinking and I gave him time to recover from the surprise. After a while he asked in a perfectly conventional way, "What town are you from?"

"Berlin."

"And you?"

"Odessa."

I had heard about the pogroms of 1941-42 in Odessa from some of the prisoners in the camp. Every Jew who had not already escaped was murdered by the Germans. When the town was reoccupied by the Red Army, the surviving members of the Jewish community returned to find the mass graves in which their friends and relatives had been buried. Of course Moireddin, for that was his name, knew all these details. And it was only natural that he should feel resentment against any German he met. It was not just a question of the Jews of Odessa, but of six million others in Europe as well.

We said very little to each other on this first day. We loaded up our sledges and pulled them over to the building site. I saw to it that the old man didn't do too much. When we said good-by to each other he made a little bow and said, "Thank you very much."

The next day I put him wise to the basic rules of camp life:

1. Do as little work as possible.
2. Eat as much as possible.
3. Get as much rest as possible.
4. Take every opportunity you can to get warm.
5. Don't stand any nonsense from anybody.
6. If anyone hits you, hit back immediately without a moment's hesitation.

"But I've never hit a human being in my life," answered Moireddin.

"If you hit anyone here you're not hitting a human being but a bit of human scum. You'll find life here at least as difficult as the Germans do. If you once allow anyone to hit you without sticking up for yourself, they'll never stop."

A week later he was transferred to a brigade loading up slag. It was a filthy job for him. I saw Moireddin every day when the shifts changed. One day he wasn't there. I asked the people in his brigade what had become of him and they said, "Moireddin's got five days in the *bur*!"

"What for?"

"For hitting the brigade leader!"

And they told me what had happened. The brigade leader had given Moireddin the job of spreading out the slag and stopping it from slipping off the lorry once it had been dumped there. It was the worst job of the lot. The man doing it had to stand in a cloud of dust all through the shift and was absolutely covered in filth at the end of it.

Moireddin said to the brigade leader, "You're giving me the hardest and dirtiest job of the lot. I'm sixty-two and the oldest man in your brigade. Find someone younger."

There followed a short exchange of words. The brigade leader gave Moireddin a push, Moireddin dropped his shovel, seized his opponent by his *bushlát* with a rapidity that no one would have suspected of him, and hurled him on to his back in a pile of rubble. Then he picked up a large lump of slag preparatory to crashing it into the brigade leader's face. The latter, however, jumped up and ran away.

The incident would have passed off without any consequences if the officer on duty hadn't happened to spot it from the guardroom. He sent for Moireddin.

"Why did you attack your brigade leader like that?"

"I don't allow anyone to lay hands on me."

"There's no need to throw him into a pile of rubble just because he lays hands on you."

"That's my business, not yours."

"I'll show you whose business it is. You can go to the *bur* for five days for using violence to your brigade leader."

Moireddin was taken off that evening. When he reappeared again, his face gray with lack of sleep and exhaustion, I offered him my congratulations.

"You fought like Bar Kochba himself!"

This affair founded Moireddin's reputation. He was a man who wouldn't let you lay hands on him. He was regarded with respect. His brigade leader treated him particularly politely. He would never give him a hard or dirty job to do again. When, a few days later, a Romanian started cursing the Jews, Moireddin hit him as hard as he could on the nose.

The anti-Semitic feeling in the camps at Vorkuta is more intense than it ever was even among the anti-Semitic German middle classes under Hitler. The Jews in these camps are living side by side with many of their most brutal persecutors.

For instance, there is the notorious Katchenko.

In some of the areas occupied by the Germans, the *Sicherheitsdienst* didn't slaughter the Jews themselves but got volunteers among the local population, to whom they supplied weapons, to do it for them. Katchenko had been one of these volunteers. He had been responsible for the deaths of thousands. There are many such ex-S-D volunteers in Vorkuta today.

One day a Romanian in the carpenter's shop chased a Jew away from the stove. "My God," he said, "if I'd laid my hands on you in Odessa in 1941, you wouldn't be showing your ugly Jewish face around here today."

For a fortnight I worked in partnership with a Belorussian. One night during a break he took me into his confidence.

"When the Germans came, we herded all the Jews in our town together and shot them. Thirteen thousand of them altogether. Not bad, eh?"

He expected me to approve.

A Ukrainian anti-Communist partisan told me, "One day in 1942 a Jew came to us in the woods. He thought we were Red Partisans. 'I want to help you,' he said, 'I'll show you where the Germans are.' We put a rope round his neck and said, 'We're going to hang you.' He wouldn't believe it; he thought we were being funny. We gave him time to grasp the fact that his last hour had come and then hanged him from a tree."

Another Russian was sleeping next door to me for a time. When I asked him why he had been arrested, he said, "I shot eighty-four Jews."

"All by yourself?"

"All with my own pistol. And they gave me twenty-five years for it. Disgraceful, isn't it?"

During the war these creatures had all worked either for the *Sicherheitsdienst* or the Gestapo. Now they are mostly in privileged positions and working for the NKVD. Katchenko, for example, was in charge of one of the building projects in the town.

One day a fight took place between Katchenko and a little Jew from Odessa. Their relative sizes were those of David and Goliath. Three times the little Jew hurled himself at Katchenko's throat, three times Katchenko knocked him to the ground with his fist. After the third time he lay there unconscious. It was an unwritten law in the camp that no one ever interfered in a fight.

The same evening the little Jew went to the head of the works department who was an officer of the camp administration, and a Jew himself, and made a tremendous scene.

He said, "My parents, my brothers and sisters, and many

of my friends were murdered by this man Katchenko. You know the ghastly things that happened in Rovno and Gomel and Odessa as well as I do. Aren't you ashamed of yourself putting a man like that, with the murder of thousands of Jews on his conscience, in charge of a building site where he can beat up Jews whenever he likes? You know as well as I do that Katchenko would hang both me *and* you from the highest beam in the guardhouse this evening if only he could."

The officer didn't answer. Katchenko stayed in his job. He was kept there by the NKVD.

Many of the individual histories of the Jews in the camps are almost unbearably tragic. There is Nissenzweig, for example, who was at one time an actor in Warsaw. In 1939, when the Germans came, he succeeded in escaping to the Soviet Union. He became a member of the Jewish Theater Company in Moscow. After the war this began to be looked on with increasing suspicion by the Soviets. The Israeli Ambassador in Moscow, Mrs. Mayerssohn, was very popular among Soviet Jews, and there were demonstrations of sympathy for her when she appeared in the theater. The theater was closed immediately. The entire company down to the night watchman was arrested and sentenced to ten years.

During the war, at the time when good relations still existed between the Russians and the Americans, Odessa received an official visit from an American rabbi. This rabbi had a number of official and unofficial meetings with representatives of the Jewish community there. Years later, not only all those he had talked to but all their relatives, friends, and acquaintances were arrested in the course of one gigantic, comprehensive sweep by the NKVD. At their trial they were classified as a "Jewish-Zionist Espionage Organization." Almost everyone got twenty-five years. Moireddin himself was a victim of this trial, although he had never even seen the American rabbi.

One or two members of the "conspiracy" are to be found in every camp in Vorkuta.

I made friends with a Russian Jew named Becker, who was once the headmaster of a secondary school in Odessa. He had exchanged a few words with the American rabbi when he paid an unofficial visit to the school, and was one of the first to be arrested.

Some years later, in the summer of 1953, just after Stalin's death and at the time of the rehabilitation of the Jewish doctors accused of espionage, Becker was sent back to Odessa for reinterrogation. The Jews in the camp began to have a certain amount of hope. Perhaps their trial too would be reviewed, perhaps their innocence too would at last be proclaimed.

When Becker came back in the late autumn of 1953 he reported that nothing had changed. The same examining judge, the same idiotic questions, the same ludicrous accusations. A few Jews who had been condemned in this trial made written applications to have the proceedings reviewed. They received the answer which prisoners always get when they put in a complaint. Their sentences had been confirmed.

One of Stalin's last actions just before his death was to inaugurate a well-planned campaign of anti-Semitism. The first moves in it were hardly noticed by the general public. The army, for instance, issued a decree to the effect that Soviet citizens of those races that had separate national states outside the Soviet Union were henceforth ineligible to become officers above the rank of second lieutenant.

There was no mention of the Jews in this order. But they were affected equally with the Germans, Greeks, Finns, and other races the Soviet government considered unreliable. The order has been strictly carried out. From that day to this no Jews have been promoted in the Red Army and no new Jewish officer has been able to rise above the rank of second

lieutenant. No Jew may enter the Russian military academy.

The first public move in the campaign was the Slansky trial, which *Pravda* reported in the same cynical style in which it had reported the trials of the Soviet opposition between 1936 and 1938. This trial, which cost the elite of the Czech Communist Party their lives, was used to set in motion the first great wave of propaganda against Zionism, Israel, and the Jews in general.

With the fine political instinct of their race the Jews knew quite well that these attacks on Zionism were no accident but the beginning of a carefully planned campaign on the part of Stalin. And a short time later came the publication of the confessions of prominent Jewish doctors such as Vovsky, Feldmann, and others. These were in the classical NKVD style and admitted to every crime that happened to serve Stalin's purpose at the time.

What was the purpose of it all?

Stalin knew well enough what a slender basis his regime rested on within the Soviet Union. He knew that he had only the bare minimum of popular support and that a certain amount of popular support is necessary for every sort of government. He knew the underlying anti-Semitism of the Soviet peoples and he knew that, because the Jews have always been identified with communism, this anti-Semitism was increasing as social and nationalist discontent increased. By instigating an official anti-Semitism of his own Stalin hoped to achieve exactly the same effect as Hitler. It was a concession to the anti-Semitic masses who were unlikely to get anything else they wanted from him, and whom he hoped to win over by an appeal to their baser instincts.

And in fact this official anti-Semitism had a considerable success among the population. It could be seen operating in the camps. Hitherto the prisoners had had nothing but contempt for *Pravda,* the chief organ of the Communist Party.

As soon as the anti-Semitic articles started appearing they began to read it. The pogrom heroes of 1941-42 felt events taking a turn they had never dared to hope for again.

Political officers came into the blocks to discuss the *Pravda* articles. The guards began making anti-Semitic remarks during the daily roll calls. The camp administration was too tightly organized for it to be possible for such remarks to be made without their tacit consent or even without direct orders.

In the *stolóvaya* it became a common occurrence for Jew to hear remarks like, "We'll soon be giving you your chance to see Jehovah," "Find yourself a good strong post for us to hang you from." The murderers of 1941 and 1942 were in splendid form. It was an attempt to divert the thoughts of Soviet citizens (whether free or in prison) from their own problems and in many cases, in the camps at any rate, it succeeded.

The death of Stalin put an end to this cynical game. The Jews were saved for the moment. But it seems more than probable that Stalin's experiment will be repeated one day. The tsar used exactly the same method for diverting popular attention from the real problems of the day at the time of the Black Hundred. The masses of the Soviet Union are more anti-Semitic than ever and the new government is certainly no less unscrupulous than Stalin or the tsars.

The Jews themselves reacted to the situation with a number of typical Jewish jokes that reflected the new anti-Semitic line.

For example: a Jew and a captain of the NKVD were living together in the same house. Details about the "conspiracy" of Jewish doctors appeared in the papers. When they met each other in the hall on the way to work next morning the Jew said to the NKVD captain, "Good evening, Captain." The same thing happened on the next morning and again on the next. At last the NKVD captain could bear it no longer. He said, "I can't understand you. It is now nine o'clock in the

morning, and every morning I see you at this time, and every time you say, 'Good evening.'" The Jew answered, "I'm sorry, Captain, I don't know what it is, but somehow every time I see you things look so black."

Or again: a Jewish engineer, who had just passed out from his technical training college, applied for a post in a factory. The managing director said, "Yes, we're badly in need of engineers. Just fill in the usual form with personal particulars and the job is yours."

The Jew filled in all his particulars and under the heading "Nationality" wrote "Jew." The next day he was told that the post had been given to someone else. An attempt to get a job in a second factory ended in exactly the same way. In the third factory when the Jew came to fill in the form he wrote under the heading "Nationality" "Indian." He was given the job at once. A few days later the managing director sent for him and said, "There's another Indian working in the factory here. I'm sure you'd be glad to have the chance of speaking to him in your native tongue."

It was impossible for the Jew to refuse the invitation. When he was introduced to the Indian by the managing director he was so appalled at the thought of the impending catastrophe that he couldn't help letting out a Hebrew oath. The Indian replied with the same oath. Whereupon the manager joined in too. All three of them were Jews.

The link between Jewry and communism had its origins in the oppression from which the Jews suffered under the tsars. They were not allowed for instance to move out of country districts into the big towns. There was a limit set to the number of Jewish students who could study at the universities. The October Revolution removed all these restrictions from which the Jews had suffered. It was understandable that many of them, particularly among the younger people, should identify

themselves with the social and political objectives of the new regime. But a large section of Russian Jewry refused to commit itself. It was only after the civil war when Jewish mothers and fathers had to find husbands for their daughters that Jewry really became identified with communism. The "good matches" to be found among the old commercial middle classes no longer existed. The prosperous Jews were now all either officials of the Party or employed in some commercial branch of the State machine. And to these the daughters of Israel were married.

At the same time the bonds which had up till now held Jewish families and communities together were gradually being dissolved. The religious factor which had played such an important part was no longer there. And even among the Jews there began to appear signs of that public and private demoralization that is characteristic of the Soviet system.

A particularly tragic example of the bitter consequences of the link between Jewry and communism is shown by the history of the Jews in Lithuania after 1918. After the First World War the Lithuanian government introduced a set of laws for the Jews similar to those that had existed under the tsars: limitation of the numbers of university students, limitation of commercial activity. "It was only in the export trade that you still found Jews," a Lithuanian told me. "We were afraid that it might cause too much disruption if we eliminated them there as well." As a result of this state of affairs, when the Soviets occupied Lithuania in 1940, the Jews naturally went over to the Communists to a man. A lot of the high officials of the new Soviet Lithuanian administration and of the State Trading Departments were Jews. The measures taken against the Lithuanian population—the deportations to Siberia and the Arctic for example—were partly carried out by Jews. When the Germans marched in in 1941 the Lithuanians shot all the Jews who had not already fled.

I have spoken to Lithuanians who took part in these mass shootings. They were carried out with the same brutality as in all the other areas occupied by Hitler's armies in the East.

"They whimpered and screamed and offered us their gold, but we shot them and threw their gold into the graves with them."

In 1944 the Russian Army returned to Lithuania and with it a great many Jews who had fled in 1940. The graves that they found were hardly calculated to produce peace. A three-year partisan war of almost unparalleled ferocity was the outcome.

Whenever conversation in the camps turns to the subject of what will happen when the Soviet Union collapses, the enemies of the Jews, whether Lithuanians, Ukrainians, or Poles, always say the same thing: "You can be sure of one thing, there won't be a single Jew left alive by the time we've finished."

The non-Communist Jews of the Soviet Union find themselves in one of the most tragic situations in which Jews have ever found themselves in all their long history. They are faced on the one hand by the anti-Semitism of a considerable part of the population, which identifies the Jews with communism; on the other hand by a Communist government that sentences them to many decades of forced labor. If the system lasts, they will stay in the camps for the rest of their lives; if it collapses they will go down with it. They know that Hitler's pogroms cost six million Jewish lives. The collapse of communism will bring about another pogrom, which will leave few of the four million Jews now left in the Soviet Union alive. And this pogrom will take place before any foreign influence can be brought to bear to prevent it.

Their situation is desperate and they look to the future with the same vague mixture of pessimism and hope with which the German Jews faced the future in 1933. Perhaps, they say to

themselves, it will be all right after all. All they long for is a little peace and security, a bit of land which they can cultivate undisturbed and on which they can bring up their children. Their dreams revolve round the land of their forefathers. In spirit they are by the Jordan or in Jerusalem or on Lake Genesareth. A Polish Jew tells them about Tel-Aviv which he visited in 1938. He is an emissary from the Promised Land they will never see. As he describes a performance of *Rachel and Jacob* that he saw in one of the theaters there are tears in his eyes.

The appalling pogroms that took place during the German occupation were a shock from which the surviving Soviet Jews have not yet recovered. When describing the events of that time they are quite unable to prevent their horror breaking through.

There is a Jew at Vorkuta, for example, who doesn't look pronouncedly Jewish and who has a Ukrainian name. When the Germans took his village he managed to escape but could not succeed in getting through the front to the East. He settled down in a village in which no one knew him. He decided that he was safest in the heart of the lion's den and eventually became mayor of this village under a German commandant. It never occurred to anyone that he was a Jew. And so, as mayor, he had to witness the extermination of every Jew in the area. As usual no exceptions were made. Babies, women, old men—all were slaughtered.

Of course when the Russians reoccupied the area he was sentenced to ten years for his activity under the Germans.

There is another Jew there who was once a member of the Jewish police in the Warsaw ghetto. He succeeded in escaping to the Russians, who gave him twenty-five years for being a policeman.

When one asked the Jews why more of them had not fled

from the Germans in time, they usually answered, "We thought it impossible that anything like that could happen."

They thought of the Germans as a people with a liberal tradition, among whom the Jews held a place they had won for themselves by industry and intelligence. They did not run away because they couldn't imagine that a people with the humanist tradition of Goethe and Schiller could be capable of the greatest mass murder that history had ever known. It was almost impossible to explain to them how the catastrophe came about. They could not realize that this anti-Semitism was an anti-Semitism inspired by the Nazi government, and that it found little echo among the German people as a whole, apart from those commercial middle classes in which National Socialism had its roots.

Moireddin afterward confessed to me that when he first came into the camp he could never see a German without shuddering.

"I see my friends and relations standing there defenseless, and all round them stand tall, blond Germans with Tommy guns in their hands."

Only gradually was he able to overcome his sensitiveness.

One day I introduced him to a German with whom he gradually became very friendly. Some months later I asked him, "What do you think of Schultz?"

Moireddin answered, "He is a good man."

"Are you quite sure?"

"In the first place I feel it instinctively, and secondly, I have a number of proofs of his goodness."

"Do you realize that Schultz was once an SS Hauptsturmführer in Hitler's personal bodyguard?"

Schultz had been born in 1918. In 1935 at the age of seventeen, a blond, blue-eyed, six-foot youth conforming to the Nordic ideal in every way, he enlisted in the SS in Hitler's bodyguard. He was a good soldier and was quickly promoted.

He took part in the Polish campaign and was decorated for bravery. In May, 1940, in Belgium he was hit by a bullet in the spine. It was only by a miracle that he survived. He had plenty of time to think things over, but though a lot of things worried him, nothing could shake his personal loyalty to the Führer. When the Third Reich collapsed in 1945—he was in Prague at the time—his whole world collapsed with it. The horrors of National Socialism that he had steadily refused to see were laid irrefutably before him. His conscience was awakened. He met his first Jews among his captors and they treated him well. He realized that they were men like anyone else. He sums up his feelings for National Socialism in these words: "They misled me and abused my loyalty."

I was curious to see how Moireddin would react to this information. At first he was as shocked as the time when I first told him that I was a German and not a Latvian. But his relationship with Schultz continued unaltered. He never referred to what I had told him again.

In the end Moireddin had quite a circle of friends among the Germans and he was always on the best of terms with them. Sometimes he was even surprised at himself.

"When I speak with you," he said in German with his Jewish accent, "it's as if I were speaking with Jews."

Like all new arrivals, Moireddin soon began to feel hungry. Technically speaking there was no difficulty in getting him enough to eat, but he found it a painful business to take bread from us. He had never accepted charity from anyone in his life and he was quite unaccustomed to the practice by which one prisoner automatically helped another.

The Jews in the camp thought out how they could help the old man without causing him humiliation. In the end the following scheme was decided on.

Moireddin owned a pair of leather shoes. They were one of

the many thousands of pairs the Americans had delivered to the Soviet Union during the war. Their quality was only to be matched in the Kremlin itself. Fifty roubles was a reasonable price for them in the camp. Someone suggested to Moireddin that he should sell these shoes. He agreed. He was offered a price far in excess of the normal price, to be paid at the rate of one-half ration of bread every day. But he had no idea of the camp price for a pair of shoes. So for nearly a year he received an extra half-ration of bread a day for his shoes without realizing that it was his friends who were helping him. He was no longer hungry; he no longer felt humiliated by having to accept charity; and, hitherto always a bad businessman, he at last had the satisfaction of thinking that he had been able to bring off a successful deal.

6

The Nations of Vorkuta

IN THE three months between my arrival at Vorkuta and early November I lost more than twenty-eight pounds in weight. Each time we went for a bath, which was every ten days, I could see the signs of malnutrition developing rapidly. My ribs began to stick out, my legs grew thin, my arm and shoulder muscles disappeared. The severe form of malnutrition that was the fate of most of the Germans there, with all its innumerable, often fatal complications, was staring me in the face. As a result of continually lifting heavy weights I had developed a double rupture. This seemed to offer a possible respite. I went to the surgeon during his consultation hour and asked him to operate.

"I can't," he answered. "Ruptures can't be operated on during the winter."

"Why on earth not?"

"It's an official order from the Trofimovitch. No operations for ruptures during the winter."

"I don't understand."

"Look, one prisoner in every three or four has a rupture. They're very common in the camp due to the combination of hard work and undernourishment. But everyone waits till the