

one ever does anything out of the generosity of his heart. You have to pay for everything. If someone proposes something to you that is unselfish, disinterested, you can be sure it's a dirty trick, a provocation. The main thing is: avoid *general-assignment work*. Avoid it from the day you arrive. If you land in *general-assignment work* that first day, then you are lost, and this time for keeps."

"General-assignment work?"

"General-assignment work—that is the main and basic work performed in any given camp. Eighty percent of the prisoners work at it, and they all die off. All. And then they bring new ones in to take their places and they again are sent to general-assignment work. Doing this work, you expend the last of your strength. And you are always hungry. And always wet. And shoeless. And you are given short rations and short everything else. And put in the worst barracks. And they won't give you any treatment when you're ill. The only ones who *survive* in camps are those who try at any price not to be put on general-assignment work. From the first day."

"At any price?"

"At any price!"

At Krasnaya Presnya I assimilated and accepted this altogether unexaggerated advice of the cruel special-assignment prisoner, forgetting only to ask him one thing: How do you measure that price? How high do you go?

## Chapter 3



### *The Slave Caravans*

It was painful to travel in a Stolypin, unbearable in a Black Maria, and the transit prison would soon wear you down—and it might just be better to skip the whole lot and go straight to camp in the red cattle cars.

As always, the interests of the state and the interests of the individual coincided here. It was also to the state's advantage to dispatch sentenced prisoners straight to the camps by direct routing and thus avoid overloading the city trunk-line railroads, automotive transport, and transit-camp personnel. They had long since grasped this fact in Gulag, and it had been taken to heart: witness the caravans of *red cows* (red cattle cars), the caravans of barges, and, where there were no rails and no water, the caravans on foot (after all, prisoners could not be allowed to exploit the labor of horses and camels).

The red trains were always a help when the courts in some particular place were working swiftly or the transit facilities were overcrowded. It was possible in this way to dispatch a large number of prisoners in one batch. That is how the millions of peasants were transported in 1929–1931. That is how they exiled Leningrad from Leningrad. That is how they populated the Kolyma in the thirties: every day Moscow, the capital of our country, belched out one such train to Sovetskaya Gavan, to Vanino Port. And each provincial capital also sent off red trainloads, but not on a daily schedule. That is how they removed the Volga German Republic to Kazakhstan in 1941, and later all

the rest of the exiled nations were sent off in the same way. In 1945 Russia's prodigal sons and daughters were sent from Germany, from Czechoslovakia, from Austria, and simply from western border areas—whoever had gotten there on his own—in such trains as these. In 1949 that is how they collected the 58's in Special Camps.

The Stolypins follow routine railroad schedules. And the red trains travel on imposing waybills, signed by important Gulag generals. The Stolypins cannot go to an empty site, to "nowhere"; their destination must always be a station, even if it's in some nasty little two-bit town with some preliminary detention cells in an attic. But the red trains can go into emptiness: and wherever one does go, there immediately rises right next to it, out of the sea of the steppe or the sea of the taiga, a new island of the Archipelago.

Not every red cattle car is ready as is to transport prisoners. First it has to be prepared. But not in the sense some of our readers might expect: that the coal or lime it carried before it was assigned to carry people has to be swept out and the car cleaned—that isn't always done. Nor in the sense that it needs to be calked and have a stove installed if it is winter. (When the section of the railroad from Knyazh-Pogost to Ropcha was being built and wasn't yet part of the general railroad network, they immediately began to transport prisoners on it—in freight cars without either stoves or bunks. In winter the zeks lay on the icy, snowy floor and weren't even given any hot food, because the train could make it all the way through this section in less than a day. Whoever can in imagination lie there like them and survive those eighteen to twenty hours shall indeed survive! Here is what was involved in preparing a red cattle car for prisoners: The floors, walls, and ceilings had to be tested for strength and checked for holes or faults. Their small windows had to be barred. A hole had to be cut in the floor to serve as a drain, and specially protected by sheet iron firmly nailed down all around it. The necessary number of platforms on which convoy guards would stand with machine guns had to be evenly distributed throughout the train, and if there were too few, more had to be built. Access to the roofs of the cars had to be provided. Sites for searchlights had to be selected and supplied with uninterrupted electric power.

Long-handled wooden mallets had to be procured. A passenger car had to be hooked on for the staff, and if there wasn't one, then instead heated freight cars had to be prepared for the chief of convoy, the Security officer, and the convoy. Kitchens had to be built—for the convoy and for the prisoners. And only after all this had been done was it all right to walk along the cattle cars and chalk on the sides: "Special Equipment" or "Perishable Goods." (In her chapter, "The Seventh Car," Yevgeniya Ginzburg described a transport of red cars very vividly, and her description largely obviates the necessity of presenting details here.)

The preparation of the train has been completed—and ahead lies the complicated combat operation of *loading* the prisoners into the cars. At this point there are two important and obligatory *objectives*:

- to conceal the loading from ordinary citizens
- to terrorize the prisoners

To conceal the loading from the local population was necessary because approximately a thousand people were being loaded on the train simultaneously (at least twenty-five cars), and this wasn't your little group from a Stolypin that could be led right past the townspeople. Everyone knew, of course, that arrests were being made every day and every hour, but no one was to be horrified by the sight of large numbers of them *together*. In Orel in 1938 you could hardly hide the fact that there was no home in the city where there hadn't been arrests, and weeping women in their peasant carts blocked the square in front of the Orel Prison just as in Surikov's painting *The Execution of the Streltsy*. (Oh, who one day will paint this latter-day tragedy for us? But no one will. It's not fashionable, not fashionable. . . .) But you don't need to show our Soviet people an entire trainload of them collected in one day. (And in Orel that year there were.) And young people mustn't see it either—for young people are our future. Therefore it was done only at night—and every night, too, each and every night, and that was the way it went for several months. The black line of prisoners to be transported was driven from the prison to the station on foot. (Meanwhile the Black Marias were busy making new arrests.) True, the women realized, the women somehow found out, and at night they came to the station from

all over the city and kept watch over the trains on the siding. They ran along the cars, tripping over the ties and rails, and shouting at every car: "Is So-and-so in there?" "Is So-and-so in there?" And they ran on to the next one, and others ran up to this one: "Is So-and-so in there?" And suddenly an answer would come from the sealed car: "I'm in here. I'm here!" Or else: "Keep looking for him. He's in another car." Or else: "Women! Listen! My wife is somewhere out there, near the station. Run and tell her."

These scenes, unworthy of our contemporary world, testify only to the then inept organization of train embarkations. The mistakes were noted, and after a certain night the trains were surrounded in depth by cordons of snarling and barking police dogs.

And in Moscow, the loading into red cattle cars from the old Sretenka Transit Prison (which prisoners no longer remember) or from Krasnaya Presnya took place only at night; that was the rule.

However, although the convoy had no use for the superfluous light of the sun by day, on the other hand they made use of suns by night—the searchlights. They were more efficient since they could be concentrated on the necessary area, where the prisoners were seated on the earth in a frightened pack awaiting the command: "Next unit of five—stand up! To the car—on the run!" (Only on the run, so as not to have time to look around, to think things over, to run as though chased by the dogs, afraid of nothing so much as falling down.) On that uneven path. Up the loading ramp, scrambling. And clear, hostile searchlight beams not only provided light but were an important theatrical element in terrorizing the prisoners, along with yells, threats, gunstock blows on those who fell behind, and the order: "Sit down." (And sometimes, as in the station square of that same Orel: "Down on your knees." And like some new breed of believers at prayer, the whole thousand would get down on their knees.) Along with that running to the car, quite unnecessary except for intimidation—for which it was very important. Along with the enraged barking of the dogs. Along with the leveled gun barrels (rifles or automatic pistols, depending on the decade). And the main thing was to undermine, to crush the prisoner's will power so he wouldn't

think of trying to escape, so that for a long time he wouldn't notice his new advantage: the fact that he had exchanged a stone-walled prison for a railroad car with thin plank walls.

But in order to load one thousand prisoners into railroad cars at night so precisely, the prison had to start jerking them out of their cells and processing them for transport the morning before, and the convoy had to spend the entire day on a long-drawn-out and strict procedure of checking them in while still in prison and then holding those who'd been checked in for long hours, not, of course, in the cells by now, but in the courtyard, on the ground, so as not to mix them up with the prisoners still belonging in the prison. Thus for the prisoner the loading at night was only a relief after a whole day of torment.

Besides the ordinary counts, verifications, hair clipping, clothing roasting, and baths, the core of the preparation for the prisoner transport was general *frisking*. This search was carried out not by the prison but by the convoy receiving the prisoners. The convoy was expected, in accordance with the directives regarding the red transports and in accordance with their own operational requirements, to carry out this search so that the prisoners would not be left in possession of anything that might help them to escape; to take away: everything that could saw or cut; all powders (tooth powder, sugar, salt, tobacco, tea) so they could not be used to blind the convoy; all string, cord, twine, belts, and straps because they could all be used in escaping (and that meant all kinds of straps! and so they cut off the straps which held up the artificial limb of a one-legged man—and the cripple had to carry his artificial leg on his shoulder and hop with the help of those on either side of him). The rest of the things—all "valuables" and suitcases too—were, according to instructions, supposed to be checked and carried in a special baggage car and returned to their owners at the end of the journey.

Yet the power of the Moscow directive was weak and might be ignored by the Vologda or the Kuibyshev convoy, while the power of the convoy over the prisoners was very corporeal, very real. And this fact was crucial to the third objective of the loading operation:

- in simple justice to take all the good things they possess from enemies of the people for the use of its sons

“Sit down.” “On your knees!” “Strip!” In these statutory orders of the convoy lay the basic power one could not argue with. After all, a naked person loses his self-assurance. He cannot straighten up proudly and speak as an equal to people who are still clothed. A search begins. (Kuibyshev, summer of 1949.) Naked prisoners approach, carrying their possessions and the clothes they’ve taken off. A mass of armed soldiers surrounds them. It doesn’t look as though they are going to be led to a prisoner transport but as though they are going to be shot immediately or put to death in a gas chamber—and in that mood a human being ceases to concern himself with his possessions. The convoy does everything with intentional brusqueness, rudely, sharply, not speaking one word in an ordinary human voice. After all, the purpose is to terrify and dishearten. Suitcases are shaken apart, and things fall all over the floor and are then stacked up in separate piles. Cigarette cases, billfolds, and other pitiful “valuables” are all taken away and thrown without any identifying marks into a *barrel* that is standing nearby. (And, for some reason, the fact that this particular receptacle isn’t a safe, or a trunk, or a box, but a barrel particularly depresses the naked prisoners there, and it seems so terribly futile to protest.) The naked prisoner has all he can do simply to snatch up his well-searched rags from the floor and knot them together or tie them up in a blanket. Felt boots? You can check them, throw them over there, sign for them on the list! (You aren’t the one who gets the receipt, but *you* are the one who signs for having surrendered them, certifying that you threw them onto the pile!) And when at dusk the last truck leaves the prison yard with the prisoners, they see the convoy guards rushing to grab the best leather suitcases from the pile and select the best cigarette cases from the barrel. And after them, the jailers scurry for their booty, too, and last of all the transit prison *trusties*.

That is what it cost to spend one day to get to the cattle car. And now the prisoners have clambered with relief up onto the splintered planks of the bunks. But what kind of relief is this, what kind of heated cattle car is this? Once again they are squeezed in a nutcracker between cold and starvation, between the thieves and the convoy.

If there are thieves in a cattle car (and they are, of course, not kept separate in the red trains either) they take the best places, as is traditional—on the upper bunks by the window. That’s in summer. So we can guess where their places are in winter. Next to the stove, of course, in a tight ring around the stove. As the former thief Minayev recalls: in 1949, during a severe cold wave, they were issued only *three pails* of coal for their car for the entire journey from Voronezh to Kotlas, lasting several days.<sup>1</sup> And in this crisis, the thieves not only occupied the places around the stove, and not only took all the *suckers’* warm things away from them and put them on, but didn’t even hesitate to take their *footcloths* out of their shoes and wind them around their own feet. You today, me tomorrow. It was somewhat worse with food—the thieves took charge of the whole ration for the car and then kept the best for themselves along with whatever else they needed. Loshchilin recalls a three-day prisoner transport from Moscow to Perebory in 1937. They didn’t cook anything hot on the train for such a short journey and handed out only dry rations. The thieves took the best for themselves but gave the others permission to divide up the bread and the herring; and that meant they weren’t hungry. When the ration was hot and the thieves were *in charge of distributing it*, they divided up the gruel among themselves. (A three-week transport from Kishinev to Pechora in 1945.) With all this, the thieves didn’t scruple to engage also in plain and simple robbery en route: they noticed an Estonian’s gold teeth and they pushed him down and knocked out the teeth with a poker.

The zeks considered the hot food the real advantage of the red trains: at remote stations (again where people couldn’t see them) the trains stopped and gruel and porridge were doled out to the cars. But they even managed to give out the hot food in such a way that things went wrong. They might (as on that same Kishinev train) pour out the gruel in the same pails in which they issued coal—there being nothing to wash them out with. Because drinking water was also rationed on the train and was in even shorter supply than gruel. And so you gulped down the gruel, your teeth gritting on pieces of coal. Or they brought the gruel and the hot cereal to the car and didn’t issue enough bowls

1. In a letter to me in the *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, November 29, 1963.

—twenty-five instead of forty—and promptly ordered: “Come on, come on, faster, faster. We have other cars to feed too, not just you.” How then could you eat, how could you divide it up? You couldn’t dish it out equitably on the basis of bowls, and that meant you had to estimate each portion so as not to give out too much. And those to be served first would shout: “Stir it! Stir it!” And the last kept silent: there would be more on the bottom. The first were eating and the last waiting. They would have liked the others to eat faster, because they were hungry, and meanwhile the gruel would be getting cold in the barrel and they were also being hurried from outside: “Well, have you finished? Come on now, get a move on!” And then they served the second contingent—not more and not less and not thicker and not thinner than the first. And then came estimating the leftovers correctly and pouring them out two portions to a bowl. And all this time forty people don’t so much eat as watch the sharing out and suffer.

They don’t heat the car, they don’t protect the other prisoners from the thieves, they don’t give you enough to drink, and they don’t give you enough to eat—but on the other hand they don’t let you sleep either. During the day the convoy can see the whole train very clearly and the tracks behind them, and can be sure that no one has jumped out the side or slipped down on the rails. But at night vigilance possesses them. With long-handled wooden mallets (the standard Gulag equipment) they knock resoundingly on every board of the car at every stop: maybe someone has sawed through it. And at certain stops the door of the car is thrown open. The light of the lantern or the beam of the searchlight: “Checkup!” And this means: Get on your feet and be ready to go where they tell you—everyone run to the left or to the right. The convoy guards jump inside with their mallets (others have ranged themselves in a semicircle outside with automatic pistols), and they point: to the left! That means that those on the left are in place and those on the right must get over there on the jump like fleas hopping over each other and landing where they can. And whoever isn’t nimble, whoever gets caught daydreaming, gets whacked on the ribs and back with the mallets to give him more energy. And by this time the convoy jackboots are already trampling your pauper’s pallet and all your lousy *duds* are being thrown in every direction and everywhere there are

lights and hammering: Have you sawed through any place? No. Then the convoy guards stand in the middle and begin to shift you from left to right, counting: “First . . . second . . . third.” It would be quite enough to count simply with a wave of the finger, but if that were done, it wouldn’t be terrifying, and so it is more vivid, less subject to error, more energetic and faster, to beat out that count with the same mallet on your ribs, shoulders, heads, wherever it happens to land. They have counted up to forty. So now they will go about their tossing, lighting up, and hammering at the other end of the car. It’s all over finally and the car is locked up. You can go back to sleep till the next stop. (And one can’t really say that the anxiety of the convoy guard is entirely unfounded—because those who know how can escape from the red cattle cars. For instance, they knock on a board to test it and find it has been partially sawed through. Or suddenly in the morning, when the gruel is being distributed, they see that there are several shaved faces among the unshaven ones. And they surround the car with their automatic pistols: “Hand over your knives!” And this is really just petty bravado on the part of the thieves and their allies: they got tired of being unshaven, and now they are going to have to turn in their razor.)

The red train differs from other long-distance trains in that those who have embarked on it do not know whether or not they will disembark. When they unloaded a trainload from the Leningrad prisons (1942) in Solikamsk, the entire embankment was covered with corpses, and only a few got there alive. In the winters of 1944–1945 and 1945–1946 in the village of Zheleznodorozhny (Knyazh-Pogost), as in all the main rail junctions in the North, the prisoner trains from liberated territories (the Baltic states, Poland, Germany) arrived with one or two carloads of corpses tacked on behind. That meant that en route they had carefully taken the corpses out of the cars that contained the living passengers and put them in the dead cars. But not always. There were many occasions when they found out who was still alive and who was dead only when they opened up the car after arriving at the Sukhobezvodnaya (Unzhlag) Station. Those who didn’t come out were dead.

It was terrifying and deadly to travel this way in winter because the convoy, with all its bother about security, wasn’t able

to haul coal for twenty-five stoves. But it wasn't so cushy to travel this way in hot weather either. Two of the four tiny windows were tightly sealed and the car roof would overheat and the convoy wasn't about to exert itself in hauling water for a thousand prisoners—after all, they couldn't even manage to give just one Stolypin car enough to drink. The prisoners considered April and September the best months for transports. But even the best of seasons was too short if the train was en route for *three months*. (Leningrad to Vladivostok in 1935.) And if such a long trip is in prospect, then arrangements have been made for both political indoctrination of the convoy soldiers and spiritual care of the imprisoned souls: in a separate railroad car attached to such a train travels a “godfather”—a Security officer. He has made his preparations for the prisoner-transport train back in prison, and prisoners are assigned to cars not simply at random but according to lists he has validated. He is the one who appoints the monitor in each car and who has instructed and assigned a stool pigeon to each. At long stops he finds some pretext for summoning both from the car and asks what the people are talking about in there. And any such Security chief would be ashamed to finish the journey without signed and sealed results. And so right there en route he puts someone under interrogation, and lo and behold! by the time they reach their destination, the prisoner has been handed a new prison term.

No, damn that red cattle car train too, even though it did carry the prisoners straight to their destination without changing trains. Anyone who has ever been in one will never forget it. Just as well get to camp sooner! Just as well arrive sooner.

A human being is all hope and impatience. As if the Security officer in camp will be any more humane or the stoolies any less unscrupulous. It's just the other way around. As if they won't force us to the ground with those same threats and those same police dogs when we arrive: “Sit down!” As if there will be less snow on the ground in camp than what has sifted through into the cattle cars. As if it means that we've already gotten to where we're going when they begin to unload us and won't be carried farther in open flatcars on a narrow-gauge track. (And how can they carry us in open flatcars? How can we be kept under guard? That's a problem for the convoy. And here is how they

do it: They order us to lie down all huddled together and they cover us with one big tarpaulin, like the sailors in the motion picture *Potemkin* before they're to be executed. And say thank you for the tarpaulin too. In the North, in October, Olenyev and his comrades had the luck to have to sit in open flatcars all day long. They had already embarked, but no locomotive had come. First it rained. Then it froze. And the zeks' rags froze on them.) The tiny train will jerk and toss as it moves, and the sides of the flatcar will begin to crack and break, and the bouncing will hurl someone off the car and under the wheels. And here is a riddle: If one is traveling sixty miles from Dudinka through Arctic frost in open flatcars on the narrow-gauge track, then where are the thieves going to be? Answer: In the middle of each flatcar, so the livestock around them will keep them warm and keep them from falling under the train themselves. Right answer! Question: What will the zeks see at the end of this narrow-gauge track (1939)? Will there be any buildings there? No, not a one. Any dugouts? Yes, but already occupied, not for them. And does that mean that the first thing they do will be to dig themselves dugouts? No, because how can they dig in the Arctic winter? Instead, they will be sent out to mine metal. And where will they live? What—live? Oh, yes, live . . . They will live in tents.

But will there always be a narrow-gauge track? No, of course not. The train arrived: Yertsovo Station, February, 1938. The railroad cars were opened up at night. Bonfires were lit alongside the train and disembarkation took place by their light; then a count-off, forming up, and a count-off again. The temperature was 32 degrees below zero Centigrade. The prisoners' transport train had come from the Donbas, and all the prisoners had been arrested back in the summer and were wearing low shoes, oxfords, even sandals. They tried to warm themselves at the fires, but the guards chased them away: that's not what the fires were there for; they were there to give light. Fingers grew numb almost instantly. The snow filled the thin shoes and didn't even melt. There was no mercy and the order was given: “Fall in! Form up! One step to the right or left and we'll fire without warning. Forward march!” The dogs on their chains howled at their favorite command, at the excitement of the moment. The convoy guards marched ahead in their sheepskin coats—and the doomed

prisoners in their summer clothes marched through deep snow on a totally untraveled road somewhere into the dark taiga, nary a light ahead. The northern lights gleamed—for them it was their first and probably their last view of them. The fir trees crackled in the frost. The ill-shod prisoners paced and trod down the snow, their feet and legs growing numb from the cold.

Or, as another example, here is a January, 1945, arrival at Pechora. (“Our armies have captured Warsaw! Our armies have cut off East Prussia!”) An empty snowy field. The prisoners were tossed out of the cars, made to sit down in the snow by sixes, painstakingly counted off, miscounted, and counted again. They were ordered to stand up and then were harried through a snowy virgin waste for four miles. This prisoner transport was also from the south—from Moldavia. And everyone was wearing leather shoes. The police dogs were right on their heels, and the dogs pushed the zeks in the last row with their paws on their backs, breathing on the backs of their heads. (Two priests were in that row—old gray-haired Father Fyodor Florya and young Father Viktor Shipovalnikov, who was helping to hold him up.) What a use for police dogs? No, what self-restraint it showed on the dogs’ part! After all, they wanted to bite so badly!

Finally they arrived. There was a camp reception bath; they had to undress in one cabin, run across the yard naked, and wash in another. But all this was bearable now: the worst was over. They had *arrived*. Twilight fell. And all of a sudden it was learned there was no room for them; the camp wasn’t ready to receive the prisoner transport. And after the bath, the prisoners were again formed up, counted, surrounded by dogs, and were marched *back* to their prisoner-transport train all those four miles, but this time in the dark. And the car doors had been left open all those hours, and had lost even their earlier, pitiful measure of warmth, and then all the coal had been burned up by the end of the journey and there was nowhere to get any more now. And in these circumstances, they froze all night and in the morning were given dried carp (and anyone who wanted to drink could chew snow), and then marched back along the same road again.

And this, after all, was an episode with a *happy* ending. In this case, the camp at least *existed*. If it couldn’t accept them today, it would tomorrow. But it was not at all unusual for the red trains

to arrive nowhere, and the end of the journey often marked the opening day of a *new* camp. They might simply stop somewhere in the taiga under the northern lights and nail to a fir tree a sign reading: “FIRST OLP.”<sup>2</sup> And there they would chew on dried fish for a week and try to mix their flour with snow.

But if a camp had been set up there even two weeks earlier, that already spelled comfort; hot food would have been cooked; and even if there were no bowls, the first and second courses would nonetheless be mixed together in washbasins for six prisoners to eat from at the same time; and this group of six would form a circle (there were no tables or chairs yet), and two of them would hold onto the handles of the washbasin with their left hands and would eat with their right hands, taking turns. Am I repeating myself? No, this was Perebory in 1937, as reported by Loshchilin. It is not I who am repeating myself, but Gulag.

Next they would assign the newcomers brigade leaders from among the camp veterans, who would quickly *teach them to live*, to make do, to submit to discipline, and to cheat. And from their very first morning, they would march off to work because the chimes of the clock of the great Epoch were striking and could not wait. The Soviet Union is not, after all, some Tsarist hard-labor Akatui for you, where prisoners got three days’ rest after they arrived.<sup>3</sup>



Gradually the economy of the Archipelago prospered. New railroad branch lines were built. And soon they were transporting prisoners by train to many places that had been reached only by water not long before. But there are natives of the Archipelago still alive who can tell you how they went down the Izhma River in genuine ancient Russian river galleys, one hundred to a boat, and the prisoners themselves did the rowing. They can tell you how they traveled in fishing smacks down the northern rivers of Ukhta, Usa, and Pechora to their native camp. Zeks were shipped to Vorkuta in barges: on large barges to Adzvavom,

2. OLP = *Otdelny Lagerny Punkt* = Separate Camp Site.

3. P. F. Yakubovich, *V Mire Otverzhenykh*.