

Kolyma Tales tell of life in the Soviet forced-labor camps and the stories are regarded by historians as important documentary materials. Nevertheless, the *Gulag* has many chroniclers, but only one Varlam Shalamov. This book can be profitably read as fictionalized history; the phrase 'historical novel' is itself a 'historical accident'; history in literature is not limited to the larger genres. But *Kolyma Tales* is much more than that. If the camps had never existed, this volume, one of the great books of world literature, would be only the more astounding as a creation of the imagination.

Separated from Alaska by the 55-mile wide Bering Strait, Kolyma was first used as a place of exile and a source of gold under the Czars. In 1853, for example, the Czarist official Muraviov-Amurski was able to send to St Petersburg three tons of gold mined by convict labor. Over half a century later the Soviet Union, the world's second largest gold producer, also exploited Kolyma as an enormous prison, where the principal occupation was gold-mining.

It is extraordinarily difficult to come up with a reliable estimate of the total number of political victims during the Soviet period. On 6 April 1990 the Soviet general and historian Dmitry Volkogonov, during a lecture delivered at the Pentagon, gave a preliminary estimate of the total number of 'repressed persons' (those imprisoned and/or murdered): 22.5 million. The estimates of some non-Soviet historians run considerably higher. If we speak only of Kolyma, there is a 1949 estimate by the Polish historian Kazimierz Zamorski of 3 million people exiled there, not more than 500,000 of whom supposedly survived.¹ In 1978 Robert Conquest estimated that

¹ Silvester Mora (pseudonym of Kazimierz Zamorski), *Kolyma: God and Forced Labor in the USSR*, Washington, DC, 1949, p. 17.

3 million people met their deaths in Kolyma – certainly not fewer than 2 million.² It is hard to grasp such figures.

The years 1937–9 were the period of the Great Purges. Millions of people were arrested, held for months in appalling prison conditions, tried on trumped-up charges and either executed or shipped to Siberia. Emaciated as a result of a hopelessly inadequate diet, denied even sufficient drinking water and toilet facilities, freezing from the cold, they would arrive at the Siberian ports of Vladivostok, Vanino or Nakhodka after a rail trip that lasted between thirty and forty days. There they were held in transit camps for varying periods of time.

Typhus epidemics killed many. Those who survived were sent by ship from the 'mainland', for the transit camps served as slave markets for the mining operations in Kolyma. Some of the mines employed agents to identify those prisoners most capable of work. Other mines simply had standing orders for a fixed number of new prisoners each year. The high mortality rate in Kolyma made for a constant shortage of manpower.

The ships used to transport prisoners to Kolyma were purchased in England, Holland and Sweden and formerly bore names such as the *Puget Sound* and the *Commercial Quaker*. Their builders had never intended them to carry passengers, but their Soviet purchasers found their capacious holds ideally suited for human cargo. In the freezing weather prisoners could easily be controlled by the use of fire pumps.

In 1931 a Soviet trust bearing the name Far Northern Construction was established to take charge of all forced-labor projects in north-eastern Siberia. With headquarters in the city of Magadan, Far Northern controlled all of Kolyma, an enormous natural prison bounded by the Pacific on the east, the

² Robert Conquest, *Kolyma*, New York, 1978.

Arctic Circle on the north and impassable mountains on the third side of the triangle. Gradually Far Northern increased its jurisdiction westward toward the Lena River and southward to the Aldan — a territory four times the size of France. Its domain may even have extended as far west as the Yenisei River. If this is true, Far Northern's authority would have extended over a territory as large as all of Western Europe.

Reingold Berzin, a Latvian communist, was in charge of the trust from 1932 to 1937. During this period conditions are reported to have been relatively tolerable: prisoners received adequate food and clothing, were given manageable work assignments and could shorten their sentences by hard work. In 1937 Berzin, his deputy I. G. Filippov and a number of others were arrested and shot as Japanese spies. Management of Far Northern was handed over to K. A. Pavlov and a pathological murderer, Major Garanin (who himself was executed in 1939). The changes in leadership were signaled by Stalin in a 1937 speech in which he criticized the 'coddling' of prisoners.

Under Pavlov and Garanin food rations were reduced to the point where most prisoners could not hope to survive: clothing and rations were insufficient for the harsh climate, and prisoners were sent to work in temperatures as cold as -60°F .

The camps were arranged in a hierarchy that provided virtually unlimited power and privilege for the senior bureaucrats. At the bottom of the non-convict pecking order were soldiers and former convicts who had been released but were not allowed to leave. Their living conditions were only slightly better than those of the prisoners.

Whenever possible, common criminals received trustee positions. Accustomed to violence, they easily controlled the political prisoners, even though the latter outnumbered them. In

general, one of the worst features of the camps was that political prisoners were constantly brutalized and murdered by professional criminals.

With the onset of the Second World War the official work-day was extended from ten to twelve hours (although unofficially it was often sixteen), and the bread ration was cut to a little over one pound per day. When the war came to a close, conditions improved, and a general amnesty was declared immediately after Stalin's death for all prisoners with less than a five-year sentence. Unfortunately, only common criminals had received such light sentences.

During the Khrushchev period the politicals were released and 'rehabilitated', meaning the government admitted that they had been innocent all along.

Several Soviet books on Kolyma were published in the pre-Gorbachev era. One is Viktor Urin's *Along the Kolyma Highway to the Pole of Cold*, published in 1959. A sort of tourist's notebook of travel impressions, the book has a number of pictures — including some of women in bathing suits — and the effect is somewhat similar to that of an early *National Geographic*. Urin intersperses his travel descriptions with his own poetry. Andrei Zimkin, whose 1963 volume *At the Headwaters of the Kolyma River* makes no mention of convicts, spent from 1933 to 1961 in Kolyma. It is not clear whether he himself was a convict or a civilian employee of the camps.

Varlam Shalamov's story is, by contrast, all too clear. A priest's son, he joined a group of youthful Trotskyites in 1927, when he was a twenty-year-old law student at Moscow University. In 1929 he was picked up in a police trap when he came to collect some illegally printed materials. He refused to testify at his trial, was sentenced to three years' hard labor and was granted an early release in 1932; sentences were still comparatively mild at the time.

By then Shalamov had already begun to write both fiction and verse, although life in the camps was a topic he would take up only later. Disappointed by lack of support from his arrested friends, he decided to disengage himself from politics, but the net of state terror ensnared him, along with millions of others.

In 1937 he was rearrested and sentenced to five years' hard labor for 'counter-revolutionary Trotskyite activities'. Retried in 1943 for having praised the Nobel Prize winner Ivan Bunin and called him a 'classic Russian writer', he was condemned to remain in the camps until the end of the war. Curiously, the new sentence turned out to be a blessing in disguise. His crime of 'anti-Soviet agitation' was viewed as trivial compared to the former 'Trotskyite activities'. Until then he had been held in a virtual death camp, where – at nearly six feet tall – his weight had dropped to 90 pounds. With the new sentence he was transferred to a prison hospital and managed to regain his weight. Gold mining once more emaciated him, and he was returned to the hospital. After that he was sent to a logging camp where the convicts were simply not fed if they did not fulfill their work norms. Captured during an escape attempt, he was dispatched to a penal zone where, if they could not work, prisoners were thrown off a mountain or tied to a horse and dragged to their deaths. Chance came to his aid when a group of Italian prisoners were delivered to the site, replacing the Soviet convicts. It was at that point that a physician took an interest in him and managed to have him assigned to paramedical courses – a second fortunate twist of fate that literally saved his life.

In 1951 Shalamov was released from the camps, and in 1953 he was permitted to leave Magadan, though not to reside in a large city. It was after this, his final release, that he began to write *Kolyma Tales*. On 18 July 1956 he was formally 'rehabil-

itated' by the Soviet government and permitted to return to Moscow, where he worked as a journalist and, in 1961, began publishing his poetry. In all, he published five slender collections. Shalamov's verse is intimately bound up with his experiences in Kolyma, a circumstance that could not be mentioned at the time in the collections themselves. But his true talent was as a prose writer, and his poetry did not bring him the recognition he had hoped for.

The manuscript of *Kolyma Tales* was brought to the United States in 1966 by Professor Clarence Brown of Princeton University. From 1970 to 1976 Roman Goul, editor of the New York Russian émigré quarterly the *New Review*, published one or two of the *Kolyma Tales* in most issues of his journal. Others appeared in the émigré journal *Grani*, published in Frankfurt-am-Main. The full Russian language version did not appear until 1978, when it was brought out by Overseas Publications Interchange Ltd in London. To protect Shalamov from reprisals the editors always placed a note to the effect that the stories were being published without the knowledge and consent of the author.

Although Shalamov had, in fact, consented to publication, he became angry with Goul for editing the stories and for failing to publish a separate collection. On the pages of *Literaturnaya gazeta* Shalamov published a statement claiming that the topic of *Kolyma Tales* was no longer relevant after Khrushchev's famous de-Stalinization speech at the Twentieth Party Congress, that he had never sent any manuscript abroad for publication and that he was a loyal Soviet citizen. He inveighed against everyone previously involved in the publication of his stories in the West, shocking his former admirers so deeply that some literally removed his portrait from their homes. But even having betrayed his own major achievement, *Kolyma Tales*, he continued to write them.

Condensed Milk

Envy, like all our feelings, had been dulled and weakened by hunger. We lacked the strength to experience emotions, to seek easier work, to walk, to ask, to beg . . . We envied only our acquaintances, the ones who had been lucky enough to get office work, a job in the hospital or the stables – wherever there was none of the long physical labor glorified as heroic and noble in signs above all the camp gates. In a word, we envied only Shestakov.

External circumstances alone were capable of jolting us out of apathy and distracting us from slowly approaching death. It had to be an external and not an internal force. Inside there was only an empty scorched sensation, and we were indifferent to everything, making plans no further than the next day.

Even now I wanted to go back to the barracks and lie down on the bunk, but instead I was standing at the doors of the commissary. Purchases could be made only by petty criminals and thieves who were repeated offenders. The latter were classified as 'friends of the people'. There was no reason for us politicals to be there, but we couldn't take our eyes off the loaves of bread that were brown as chocolate. Our heads swam from the sweet heavy aroma of fresh bread that tickled the nostrils. I stood there, not knowing when I would find the strength within myself to return to the barracks. I was staring at the bread when Shestakov called to me.

I'd known Shestakov on the 'mainland', in Butyr Prison where we were cellmates. We weren't friends, just acquaintances. Shestakov didn't work in the mine. He was an engineer-geologist, and he was taken into the prospecting group – in the office. The lucky man barely said hallo to his Moscow acquaintances. We weren't offended. Everyone looked out for himself here.

'Have a smoke,' Shestakov said and he handed me a scrap of newspaper, sprinkled some tobacco on it, and lit a match, a real match.

I lit up.

'I have to talk to you,' Shestakov said.

'To me?'

'Yeah.'

We walked behind the barracks and sat down on the lip of the old mine. My legs immediately became heavy, but Shestakov kept swinging his new regulation-issue boots that smelled slightly of fish grease. His pant legs were rolled up, revealing checkered socks. I stared at Shestakov's feet with sincere admiration, even delight. At least one person from our cell didn't wear foot rags. Under us the ground shook from dull explosions; they were preparing the ground for the night shift. Small stones fell at our feet, rustling like unobtrusive gray birds.

'Let's go farther,' said Shestakov.

'Don't worry, it won't kill us. Your socks will stay in one piece.'

'That's not what I'm talking about,' said Shestakov and swept his index finger along the line of the horizon. 'What do you think of all that?'

'It's sure to kill us,' I said. It was the last thing I wanted to think of.

'Nothing doing. I'm not willing to die.'

'So?'

'I have a map,' Shestakov said sluggishly. 'I'll make up a group of workers, take you and we'll go to Black Springs. That's fifteen kilometers from here. I'll have a pass. And we'll make a run for the sea. Agreed?'

He recited all this as indifferently as he did quickly.

'And when we get to the sea? What then? Swim?'

'Who cares. The important thing is to begin. I can't live like this any longer. "Better to die on your feet than live on your knees."' Shestakov pronounced the sentence with an air of pomp. 'Who said that?'

It was a familiar sentence. I tried, but lacked the strength to remember who had said those words and when. All that smacked of books was forgotten. No one believed in books.

I rolled up my pants and showed the breaks in the skin from scurvy.

'You'll be all right in the woods,' said Shestakov. 'Berries, vitamins. I'll lead the way. I know the road. I have a map.'

I closed my eyes and thought. There were three roads to the sea from here – all of them five hundred kilometers long, no less. Even Shestakov wouldn't make it, not to mention me. Could he be taking me along as food? No, of course not. But why was he lying? He knew all that as well as I did. And suddenly I was afraid of Shestakov, the only one of us who was working in the field in which he'd been trained. Who had set him up here and at what price? Everything here had to be paid for. Either with another man's blood or another man's life.

'OK,' I said, opening my eyes. 'But I need to eat and get my strength up.'

'Great, great. You definitely have to do that. I'll bring you some . . . canned food. We can get it . . .'

There are a lot of canned foods in the world – meat, fish,

fruit, vegetables . . . But best of all was condensed milk. Of course, there was no sense drinking it with hot water. You had to eat it with a spoon, smear it on bread, or swallow it slowly, from the can, eat it little by little, watching how the light liquid mass grew yellow and how a small sugar star would stick to the can . . .

'Tomorrow,' I said, choking from joy. 'Condensed milk.'

'Fine, fine, condensed milk.' And Shestakov left.

I returned to the barracks and closed my eyes. It was hard to think. For the first time I could visualize the material nature of our psyche in all its palpability. It was painful to think, but necessary.

He'd make a group for an escape and turn everyone in. That was crystal clear. He'd pay for his office job with our blood, with my blood. They'd either kill us there, at Black Springs, or bring us in alive and give us an extra sentence – ten or fifteen years. He couldn't help but know that there was no escape. But the milk, the condensed milk . . .

I fell asleep and in my ragged hungry dreams saw Shestakov's can of condensed milk, a monstrous can with a sky-blue label. Enormous and blue as the night sky, the can had a thousand holes punched in it, and the milk seeped out and flowed in a stream as broad as the Milky Way. My hands easily reached the sky and greedily I drank the thick, sweet, starry milk.

I don't remember what I did that day nor how I worked. I waited. I waited for the sun to set in the west and for the horses to neigh, for they guessed the end of the work day better than people.

The work horn roared hoarsely, and I set out for the barracks where I found Shestakov. He pulled two cans of condensed milk from his pockets.

I punched a hole in each of the cans with the edge of an axe, and a thick white stream flowed over the lid on to my hand.

'You should punch a second hole for the air,' said Shestakov.

'That's all right,' I said, licking my dirty sweet fingers.

'Let's have a spoon,' said Shestakov, turning to the laborers surrounding us. Licked clean, ten glistening spoons were stretched out over the table. Everyone stood and watched as I ate. No one was indelicate about it, nor was there the slightest expectation that they might be permitted to participate. None of them could even hope that I would share this milk with them. Such things were unheard of, and their interest was absolutely selfless. I also knew that it was impossible not to stare at food disappearing in another man's mouth. I sat down so as to be comfortable and drank the milk without any bread, washing it down from time to time with cold water. I finished both cans. The audience disappeared – the show was over. Shestakov watched me with sympathy.

'You know,' I said, carefully licking the spoon, 'I changed my mind. Go without me.'

Shestakov comprehended immediately and left without saying a word to me.

It was, of course, a weak, worthless act of vengeance just like all my feelings. But what else could I do? Warn the others? I didn't know them. But they needed a warning. Shestakov managed to convince five people. They made their escape the next week; two were killed at Black Springs and the other three stood trial a month later. Shestakov's case was considered separately 'because of production considerations'. He was taken away, and I met him again at a different mine six months later. He wasn't given any extra sentence for the escape attempt; the authorities played the game honestly with him even though they could have acted quite differently.

He was working in the prospecting group, was shaved and well fed, and his checkered socks were in one piece. He didn't

say hallo to me, but there was really no reason for him to act that way. I mean, after all, two cans of condensed milk aren't such a big deal.