Shock Therapy

During one blissful period in his life Merzlakov had worked as a stable-hand and used a home-made huller – a large tin can with a perforated bottom – to turn oats intended for the horses into human food. When boiled, the bitter mixture could satisfy hunger. Large workhorses from the mainland were given twice as much oats as the stocky, shaggy Yakut horses, although all the horses were worked an equally small amount of time. Enough oats were dumped in the trough of the monstrous Percheron, Thunder, to feed five Yakut horses. This was the practice everywhere, and it struck Merzlakov as being only fair. What he could not understand was the camp's rationing system for people. The mysterious charts of proteins, fats, vitamins, and calories intended for the convicts' table did not take a person's weight into consideration. If human beings were to be equated with livestock, then one ought to be more consistent and not hold to some arithmetical average invented by the office. This terrible 'mean' benefited only the light-weight convicts who, in fact, survived longer than the others. The enormous Merzlakov – a sort of human analogue to the Percheron, Thunder – felt only a greater gnawing hunger from the three spoons of porridge given out for breakfast. A member of a work gang had no way of supplementing his food supply, and furthermore, all the most important foodstuffs –

butter, sugar, meat – never made it to the camp kettle in the quantities provided for by the instructions.

Merzlakov watched the larger men die first – whether or not they were accustomed to heavy labor. A scrawny intellectual lasted longer than some country giant, even when the latter had formerly been a manual laborer, if the two were fed on an equal basis in accordance with the camp ration. Not calculated for large men, the basic nourishment could not be essentially improved even by food bonuses for heightened productivity. To eat better, one had to work better. But to work better one had to eat better. Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians were always the first to die – a phenomenon that the doctors always explained away by claiming that peoples of the Baltic states were weaker than Russians. True, their normal way of life was more dissimilar to that of the camps than was the world of the Russian peasant, and it was more difficult for them. The primary reason, however, was quite different: it wasn't that they possessed less endurance, but that they were physically bigger than the Russians.

About a year and a half earlier, Merzlakov had arrived as a newcomer at the camp. In a state of collapse from scurvy, he had been allowed to work as a stand-in orderly in the local clinic. There he learned that medical dosages were determined according to the patient's weight. New medicines were tested on rabbits, mice, or guinea pigs, and human dosages were then calculated according to body weight. Children's dosages were smaller than adult dosages.

The camp food ration, however, had no relation to the weight of the human body, and it was precisely this improperly resolved question that amazed and disturbed Merzlakov. But before he completely lost his strength, he miraculously managed to get a job as a stable-hand so he could steal oats from the horses to stuff his own stomach. Merzlakov was already

counting on surviving the winter. Perhaps something new would turn up in the spring. But it didn't work out that way. The stable manager was fired for drunkenness and the senior groom – one of those who had taught Merzlakov how to make a huller – took his place. The senior groom had himself stolen no small amount of oats in his day, and he knew exactly how it was done. Wanting to impress the administration and no longer in need of oatmeal for himself, he personally smashed all the hullers. The stable hands began to fry or boil oats and eat them unhulled, no longer making any distinction between their own stomachs and that of a horse. The new manager reported this, and several stable hands, including Merzlakov, were put in solitary for stealing oats. From there they were dismissed from the stable and returned to their former jobs – in the general work gang.

In the general work gang Merzlakov soon realized that death was near. He staggered under the weight of the logs he had to carry. The foreman, who had taken a dislike to this husky man, forced Merzlakov to carry the thick end of the log every time. At one point Merzlakov fell and, unable to get up from the snow, in a moment of decision refused to carry the damn log any farther. It was already late and dark. The guards were hurrying to their political indoctrination session; the workers wanted to return to the barracks, to food; and the foreman was late for a battle at cards. Merzlakov was the cause of the entire delay, and he was punished. At first his comrades beat him, then the foreman beat him, then the guards. The log remained lying in the snow; instead of the log, they carried in Merzlakov. He was freed from work and lay on his berth. His back ached. The paramedic rubbed it with machine grease since there were no rubbing compounds in the first-aid room.

Merzlakov kept waiting, half bent over and insistently complaining of pains in the small of the back. The pain had long since disappeared, the broken rib quickly healed, and Merzlakov was attempting at any price to save himself from being signed out to go back to work. And they didn't sign him out. At one point they dressed him, put him on a stretcher, loaded him into the back of a truck, and transferred him together with some other patients to the regional hospital. There was no X-ray machine there, and it was time to think things over seriously. Merzlakov did precisely that. For several months he lay bent in two and was finally transferred to a central hospital which, of course, had an X-ray machine. There Merzlakov was placed in the surgical division. In the traumatological ward the patients in their simplicity referred to the ward as the 'dramatological' ward, not even realizing the bitterness of the pun.

'This one,' said the surgeon, pointing to Merzlakov's chart, 'we're transferring to you, Peter Ivanovich. There's nothing we can do for him in surgery.'

'But you write in your diagnosis – "ankylosis resulting from a trauma of the spine". What am I supposed to do with him?' asked the neuropathologist.

'Well, yes, ankylosis, of course. What else can I write? After beatings, even worse things turn up. I remember there was an incident at the Sery Mine. The foreman beat one of the men . . .'

'I haven't got time to listen to your incidents, Seryozha. I ask you, why are you transferring him to me?'

'It's all written down. He has to be examined before we can make up the papers. You poke him with needles for a while, we do the papers, and we put him on the boat. Let him be a free man.'

'But you did X-rays? You should be able to see any problems without needles.'

'We did X-rays. Take a look.' The surgeon held the dark film negative up to a gauze curtain. 'The devil himself couldn't find anything in that picture. And that kind of smear is all your X-ray technicians will ever produce until we get regular current.'

'What a mess,' said Peter Ivanovich. 'OK, let's let it go at that.' And he signed his name to the history of the illness, giving his consent to transfer Merzlakov to his own ward.

The surgical ward was noisy and confusing. The northern mines were serious business, and the ward was filled with cases of frostbite, sprains, broken bones, burns. Some of the patients lay on the ward floor and in the corridors where one totally exhausted young surgeon with four assistants could only manage three or four hours of sleep a day and had no time to examine Merzlakov carefully. Merzlakov knew that the real investigation would begin in the neuropathological ward.

His entire despairing convict will was concentrated on one thing: not to straighten out. And he did not straighten out, much as he wanted to – even for a moment. He remembered the gold-mine; the cold that left him breathless with pain; the frozen, slippery stones, shiny with frost; the soup he slurped without any spoon; the rifle butts of the guards and the boots of the foremen. And he found within himself the strength not to straighten out. Already it was easier than it had been the first few weeks. Afraid to straighten out in his sleep, he slept little, knowing that all the attendants had orders to keep an eye on him and unmask his duplicity. And after such an unmasking he would be sent to a 'penal mine'. What must such a penal mine be like, if even an ordinary one left Merzlakov with such terrible memories?

On the day after his transfer, Merzlakov was taken to the doctor. The head doctor asked briefly about the origin of the

illness and shook his head in sympathy. He remarked in passing that even healthy muscles forced into an unnatural position for many months could become accustomed to the position and a man could make himself an invalid. Then Peter Ivanovich took over the examination. Merzlakov responded at random to needle pricks, pressures, and taps with a rubber hammer.

Peter Ivanovich spent more than half of his time exposing fakers. He, of course, understood the reasons for their conduct. Peter Ivanovich had himself recently been a prisoner, and he was not surprised by the childish stubbornness of the fakers or the primitiveness of their tricks. Peter Ivanovich, a former associate professor at a Siberian medical institute, had laid his own scientific career to rest in those same snows in which the convicts were saving their lives by deceiving him. It was not that he lacked pity for people, but he was more of a doctor than a human being; first and foremost he was a specialist. He was proud that a year of hard labor had not beaten the doctor, the specialist out of him. He understood his task of exposing cheaters – not from any lofty, socio-governmental point of view and not from the viewpoint of morality. Rather, he saw in this activity a worthy application of his knowledge, his psychological ability to set traps, into which hungry, half-insane people were to fall for the greater glory of science. In this battle of doctor and faker, the doctor had all the advantages – thousands of clever drugs, hundreds of textbooks, a wealth of equipment, aid from the guards, and the enormous experience of a specialist. The patient could count only on his own horror before that world from which he had come and to which he feared to return. It was precisely this horror that lent him the strength for the struggle. In exposing any faker, Peter Ivanovich experienced a deep satisfaction. He regarded it as testimony from life that he was a good doctor who had not yet

lost his qualifications but, on the contrary, had sharpened them, who could still 'do it'.

'These surgeons are fools,' he thought, lighting up a cigarette after Merzlakov had left. 'They either don't know or have forgotten topographic anatomy, and they never did know reflexes. They get along with X-rays alone, and without X-rays they can't even diagnose a simple fracture. And the bullshit they throw around!' It was crystal clear to Peter Ivanovich that Merzlakov was a faker. 'Let him stay for a week. We'll get all the tests worked up to make sure the formalities have been observed and glue all those scraps of paper into the history of the illness.' Peter Ivanovich smiled in anticipation of the theatrical effect of the new exposé. In a week a new group of patients would be shipped back to the mainland. The reports were compiled right here in the ward, and the chairman of the board of medical commissioners would arrive to examine personally the patients prepared by the hospital for departure. His role amounted to examining the documents and checking that the formalities had been observed; an individual examination of the patient took thirty seconds.

'My lists,' said the surgeon, 'contain a certain Merzlakov. The guards broke his back a year ago. I want to send him home. He was recently transferred to Neuropathology. The papers for his departure are ready.'

The chairman of the commission turned to the neuropathologist.

'Bring in Merzlakov,' said Peter Ivanovich.

The bent-over Merzlakov was led in; the chairman glanced at him.

'What a gorilla,' he said. 'But I guess there's no reason to keep that kind around.' Pen in hand, he reached for the lists.

'I won't give my signature,' said Peter Ivanovich in a clear, loud voice. 'He's a faker, and tomorrow I will have the honor to prove that to both you and the surgeon.'

'Let's set him aside then,' said the chairman indifferently, putting his pen down. 'And, in general, let's wrap things up. It's already getting late.'

'He's a faker, Seryozha,' said Peter Ivanovich, taking the surgeon by the arm as they were leaving the ward.

The surgeon withdrew his arm.

'Maybe,' he said with a disgusted frown. 'Good luck in exposing him. I hope you get your kicks out of it.'

The next day Peter Ivanovich gave a detailed report on Merzlakov to the head of the hospital at a meeting.

'I think,' he said in conclusion, 'we'll expose Merzlakov in two stages. The first will be the Rausch narcosis that you forgot, Seryozha.' Triumphantly, he turned to the surgeon. 'That should have been done right away. And if the Rausch doesn't produce any results, then . . .' Peter Ivanovich spread his hands in a gesture of resignation. 'Then we'll have to try shock therapy. I assure you, that can be very interesting.'

'Isn't that going too far?' Alexandra Sergeevna asked. She was a heavy woman who had recently arrived from the mainland. Here she ran the tubercular ward – the largest ward in the hospital.

'Not for that son of a bitch,' the head of the hospital answered.

'Let's wait and see what kind of results we get from the Rausch,' Peter Ivanovich inserted in a conciliatory fashion.

Rausch narcosis consisted of a stunning dose of ether for a short-term effect. The patient would be knocked out for fifteen or twenty minutes, giving the surgeon time to set a dislocation, amputate a finger, or open a painful abscess.

The hospital bigwigs, dressed in white gowns, surrounded the operating table at the dressing station where the obedient,

stooped-over Merzlakov was brought. The attendants reached for the cotton strips normally used to tie patients to the operating table.

'No, no,' shouted Peter Ivanovich. 'That's totally unnecessary.'

Merzlakov's face turned upward, and the surgeon placed the anesthetic mask over it, holding a bottle of ether in his other hand.

'Let's begin, Seryozha!'

The ether began to drip.

'Deeper, breathe deeper, Merzlakov. Count out loud.'

'Twenty-six, twenty-seven,' Merzlakov counted in a lazy voice, and, suddenly breaking off his count, started to mutter something fragmented, incomprehensible, and sprinkled with obscenities.

Peter Ivanovich held in his hand the left hand of Merzlakov. In a few minutes the hand fell limp. Peter Ivanovich dropped it, and the hand fell softly on to the edge of the table, as if dead. Peter Ivanovich slowly and triumphantly straightened out the body of Merzlakov. Everyone gasped with amazement.

'Now tie him down,' said Peter Ivanovich to the attendants.

Merzlakov opened his eyes and saw the hairy fist of the hospital director.

'You slime,' he hissed. 'Now you'll get a new trial.'

'Good going, Peter Ivanovich, good going!' the chairman of the commission kept repeating, all the while slapping the neuropathologist on the shoulder. 'And to think that just yesterday I was going to let him go!'

'Untie him,' Peter Ivanovich commanded. 'Get down from that table.'

Still not completely aware of his surroundings, Merzlakov felt a throbbing in his temples and the sickeningly sweet taste of ether in his mouth. He still didn't understand if he was

asleep or awake, but perhaps he had frequently had such dreams in the past.

'To hell with all of you!' he shouted unexpectedly and bent over as before. Broad-shouldered, bony, almost touching the floor with his long, meaty fingers, Merzlakov really looked like a gorilla as he left the dressing station. The orderlies reported to Peter Ivanovich that patient Merzlakov was lying on his bed in his usual pose. The doctor ordered him to be brought to his office.

'You've been exposed, Merzlakov,' the neuropathologist said. 'But I put in a good word for you to the head of the hospital. You won't be retried or sent to a penal mine. You'll just have to check out of the hospital and return to your previous mine – to your old job. You're a real hero, brother. Made us look like idiots for a whole year.'

'I don't know what you're talking about,' the gorilla said without raising his eyes from the floor.

'What do you mean, you don't know? We just straightened you out!'

'Nobody straightened me out.'

'OK, friend,' the neuropathologist said. 'Have it your own way. I wanted to help you out. Just wait. In a week you'll be begging to check out.'

'Who knows what'll happen in a week,' Merzlakov said quietly. How could he explain to the doctor that an extra week, an extra day, even an extra hour spent somewhere other than the mine was his concept of happiness. If the doctor couldn't understand that himself, how could he explain it to him? Merzlakov stared silently at the floor.

Merzlakov was led away; Peter Ivanovich went to talk to the head of the hospital.

'We can handle this tomorrow, and not next week,' the head of the hospital said upon hearing Peter Ivanovich's suggestion.

'No, I promised him a week,' Peter Ivanovich said. 'The hospital won't collapse.'

'OK,' the head of the hospital said. 'We can handle it next week. But be sure to send for me when you do. Will you tie him down?'

'We can't,' the neuropathologist said. 'He could dislocate an arm or a leg. He'll have to be held down.' Merzlakov's case history in his hand, the neuropathologist wrote 'shock therapy' in the treatment column and inserted the date.

Shock therapy consisted of an injection of camphor oil directly into the patient's bloodstream. The dose was several times that used in hypodermic injections for seriously ill coronary patients. It produced a sudden seizure similar to seizures of violent insanity or epilepsy. The effect of the camphor was a radical heightening of muscle activity and motor ability. Muscle strain was increased incredibly, and the strength of the unconscious patient was ten times that of normal.

Several days passed, and Merzlakov had no intention of voluntarily straightening out. The morning of the date scheduled in the case history arrived, and Merzlakov was brought to Peter Ivanovich. In the north any sort of amusement is treasured, and the doctor's office was packed. Eight husky orderlies were lined up along the wall. In the middle of the office was a couch.

'We'll do it right here,' Peter Ivanovich said, getting up from behind the desk. 'No sense going to surgical ward. By the way, where is Sergei Fyodorovich?'

'He can't come,' Anna Ivanovna, the physician on duty, said. 'He said he was busy.'

'Busy, busy,' Peter Ivanovich repeated. 'He ought to be here to see how I do his job for him.'

The surgeon's assistant rolled up Merzlakov's sleeve and

smeared iodine on Merzlakov's arm. Holding the syringe in his right hand, the assistant inserted the needle into a vein next to the elbow. Dark blood spurted from the needle into the syringe. With a soft movement of the thumb the assistant depressed the plunger, and the yellow solution began to enter the vein.

'Pump it in all at once,' Peter Ivanovich said, 'and stand back right away. You,' he said to the orderlies, 'hold him down.'

Merzlakov's enormous body shuddered and began to thrash about even as the orderlies took hold of him. He wheezed, struggled, kicked, but the orderlies held him firmly and he slowly began to calm down.

'A tiger, you could hold a tiger that way,' Peter Ivanovich shouted in near ecstasy. 'That's the way they catch tigers in the Zabaikal region.' He turned to the head of the hospital. 'Do you remember the end of Gogol's novel, *Taras Bulba*? "Thirty men held his arms and legs." This gorilla is bigger than Bulba, and just eight men can handle him.'

'Right,' the head of the hospital said. He didn't remember the Gogol passage, but he definitely enjoyed seeing the shock therapy.

While making rounds the next morning Peter Ivanovich stopped at Merzlakov's bed.

'Well,' he said. 'What's your decision?'

'I'm ready to check out,' Merzlakov answered.