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# G U L A G

A HISTORY



ANNE APPLEBAUM



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*This Book Is Dedicated to  
Those Who Described What Happened*

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*In the terrible years of the Yezhov terror I spent seventeen months waiting in line outside the prison in Leningrad. One day somebody in the crowd identified me. Standing behind me was a woman, with lips blue from the cold, who had, of course, never heard me called by name before. Now she started out of the torpor common to us all and asked me in a whisper (everyone whispered there):*

*"Can you describe this?"*

*And I said: "I can."*

*Then something like a smile passed fleetingly over what had once been her face . . .*

*—Anna Akhmatova, "Instead of a Preface: Requiem 1935–1940"*

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Wheeling and dealing took other forms as well. Upon arriving at Ukhtizhlag, Glikzman immediately realized that the "specialist" title he had been handed in the Kotlas transit camp—he was classified as a trained economist—had no meaning in the concentration camp itself. Meanwhile, he noticed that during the first few days in the camp, his savvier Russian acquaintances did not bother with official formalities:

Most of the "specialists" utilized the three free days to visit the offices and bureaus of the camp, seeking old acquaintances wherever they went and conducting suspicious negotiations with some of the camp officials. They were all excited and preoccupied. Every one of them had secrets of his own and was fearful lest another spoil his chances and grab the more comfortable work each coveted. In no time at all the majority of these people knew where to go, at whose door to knock, and what to say.

As a result, a genuinely qualified Polish doctor was sent to cut trees in the forest, while a former pimp was given an office job as an accountant, "although he had not the slightest notion of accounting and was altogether half illiterate."<sup>94</sup>

Those prisoners who thus managed to avoid physical labor had indeed concocted the beginnings of a survival strategy—but only the beginnings. Now, they had to learn the strange rules that governed daily life in the camps.

## Chapter 10

### LIFE IN THE CAMPS



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*The sound of a distant bell  
Enters the cell with the dawn  
I hear the bell calling out to me:  
"Where are you? Where are you?"  
"Here I am!" . . . Then tears of greeting,  
Mean tears of captivity . . .  
Not for God,  
But for you, Russia."*

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—Simeon Vilensky, 1948<sup>1</sup>

ACCORDING TO THE most accurate count to date, there were, between 1929 and 1953, 476 camp complexes in the realm of the Gulag.<sup>2</sup> But this number is misleading. In practice, each one of these camp complexes contained dozens, or even hundreds, of smaller camp units. These smaller units—*lagpunkts*—have not yet been counted, and probably cannot be, since some were temporary, some were permanent, and some were technically parts of different camps at different times. Nor can very much be said about the customs and practices of the *lagpunkts* that is guaranteed to apply to every single one. Even during Beria's reign over the system—which lasted, in effect, from 1939 until Stalin's death in 1953—living and working conditions in the Gulag would continue to vary enormously,

both from year to year and from place to place, even within the same camp complex.

"Every camp is its own world, a separate city, a separate country," wrote the Soviet actress Tatyana Okunevskaya—and every camp had its own character.<sup>3</sup> Life in one of the mass industrial camps of the far north was very different from life on an agricultural farm camp in southern Russia. Life in any camp during the most intensive period of the Second World War, when one in four *zeks* died every year, was quite different from life in the early 1950s, when death rates were nearly the same as in the rest of the country. Life in a camp headed by a relatively liberal boss was not the same as life in a camp led by a sadist. *Lagpunkts* also ranged widely in size, from several thousand to several dozen prisoners, as well as in longevity. Some lasted from the 1920s to the 1980s, when they still functioned as criminal prisons. Others, such as those set up to build the roads and railways across Siberia, lasted only as long as a single summer.

Nevertheless, on the eve of the war, certain elements of life and of work were common to the vast majority of camps. The climate still varied from *lagpunkt* to *lagpunkt*, but the huge fluctuations in national policy that had characterized the 1930s had come to a halt. Instead, the same inert bureaucracy that would eventually lay its dead hand on virtually every aspect of life in the Soviet Union slowly took over the Gulag as well.

Striking, in this regard, are the differences between the sketchy and somewhat vague rules and regulations for the camps issued in 1930, and the more detailed rules issued in 1939, after Beria had taken control. This difference seems to reflect a changing relationship between the organs of central control—the Moscow Gulag administration itself—and the commanders of camps in the regions. During the Gulag's first, experimental decade, the order papers did not attempt to dictate what camps should look like, and barely touched on the behavior of prisoners. They sketched out a general scheme, and left local commanders to fill in the blanks.

By contrast, the later orders were very specific and very detailed indeed, dictating virtually every aspect of camp life, from the method of construction of barracks to the prisoners' daily regime, in line with the Gulag's new sense of purpose.<sup>4</sup> From 1939, it seems that Beria—with, presumably, Stalin behind him—no longer explicitly intended the Gulag camps to be death camps, as some of them had been, in effect, in 1937 and 1938. Which is not to say, however, that their administrators were any more concerned with

preserving human life, let alone respecting human dignity. From 1939 on, Moscow's central concerns were economic: prisoners were to be slotted into the camp's production plan like cogs in a machine.

Toward this end, the rules emanating from Moscow dictated strict control over the prisoners, to be obtained through the manipulation of their living conditions. In principle—as noted—the camp classified every *zek* according to his sentence, his profession, and his *trudosposobnost*, or "work capacity." In principle, the camp assigned every *zek* a job, and a set of norms to fulfill. In principle, the camp allotted every *zek* the basic necessities of life—food, clothing, shelter, living space—according to how well, or how badly, he fulfilled these norms. In principle, every aspect of camp life was designed to improve production figures: even the camp "cultural-educational" departments existed largely because the Gulag bosses believed they might convince prisoners to work harder. In principle, inspection teams existed in order to make sure that all of these aspects of camp life worked harmoniously. In principle, every *zek*, even, had the right to complain—to the camp boss, to Moscow, to Stalin—if the camps were not operating according to the rules.

And yet—in practice, things were very different. People are not machines, the camps were not clean, well-functioning factories, and the system never worked the way it was supposed to. Guards were corrupt, administrators stole, and the prisoners developed ways of fighting or subverting the camps' rules. Within the camps, prisoners were also able to form their own informal hierarchies which sometimes harmonized with, and sometimes conflicted with, the official hierarchy created by the camp administration. Despite regular visits from Moscow inspectors, often followed up by reprimands and angry letters from the center, few camps lived up to the theoretical model. Despite the apparent seriousness with which prisoners' complaints were treated—whole commissions existed to examine them—they rarely resulted in actual change.<sup>5</sup>

This clash between what the Gulag administration in Moscow thought the camps were supposed to be, and what they actually were on the ground—the clash between the rules written on paper, and the procedures carried out in practice—was what gave life in the Gulag its peculiar, surreal flavor. In theory, the Gulag administration in Moscow dictated the smallest aspects of prisoners' lives. In practice, every aspect of life was also affected by the prisoners' relationships with those who controlled them, and with one another.

## ZONA: WITHIN THE BARBED WIRE

By definition, the most fundamental tool at the disposal of the camp administrators was control over the space in which prisoners lived: this was the *zona*, or "prison zone." By law, a *zona* was laid out in either a square or a rectangle. "In order to insure better surveillance," no organic or irregular shapes were permitted.<sup>6</sup> Within this square or rectangle, there was not much to interest the eye. Most of the buildings in a typical *lagpunkt* looked remarkably alike. Photographs of camp buildings once taken by Vorkuta administrators, and preserved in Moscow archives, show an array of primitive wooden buildings, otherwise indistinguishable except for the captions describing one as a "punishment cell," another as a "dining hall."<sup>7</sup> There was usually a large open space in the center of the camp, near the gate, where the prisoners stood at attention twice a day to be counted. There were usually some guards' barracks and administrators' houses, also made of wood, just outside the main gate.

What distinguished the *zona* from any other workplace was, of course, the fence that surrounded it. Jacques Rossi, in *The Gulag Handbook*, wrote that the fence

is usually built of wooden posts with one-third of their length in the ground. They range from 2.5 to 6 meters (7.5 to 18 feet) high, depending on local conditions. Seven to fifteen rows of barbed wire are stretched horizontally between the posts, which are about 6 meters (18 feet) apart. Two strands of wire are stretched diagonally between each pair of posts.<sup>8</sup>

If the camp or colony was located near or within a city, the barbed-wire fence was usually replaced by a wall or fence made of bricks or wood, so that no one approaching the site would be able to see in from the outside. These barriers were well-built: in Medvezhegorsk, for example, the headquarters of the White Sea Canal, a high wooden fence, built in the early 1930s to contain prisoners, was still standing when I visited the town in 1998.

To get through the fence, prisoners and guards alike had to travel through the *vakhta*, or "guardhouse." During the day, the guards of the *vakhta* monitored all of those who entered and left the camp, checking the passes of free workers coming into the camps, and of the convoy guards escorting prisoners on their way out. In the camp at Perm-36, which has been

restored to its original state, the *vakhta* contains a passage blocked by two gates. A prisoner would walk through the first gate, then stop in the small space in between to be searched or checked. Only then would he be allowed to walk through the second gate. It was much the same system as one finds at the entrance to a Sicilian bank.

But barbed wire and walls alone did not define the *zona's* boundaries. In most camps, armed guards observed the prisoners from high wooden watchtowers. Sometimes dogs also circled the camp, attached by chains to a metal wire which had been stretched all the way around the *zona*. The dogs, managed by special dog-handlers among the guards, were trained to bark at approaching prisoners and to follow the scent and chase anyone attempting escape. Prisoners were thus held in by barriers of sight, smell, and sound, as well as by barbed wire and brick.

They were also held in by fear, which was sometimes enough to keep prisoners within a camp that had no fence at all. Margarete Buber-Neumann was kept in a low-security camp which allowed prisoners to "move freely up to within half a mile of the camp perimeter; after that the guards shot without ceremony."<sup>9</sup> This was unusual: in most camps, the guards would shoot "without ceremony" much sooner than that. In his 1939 regulations, Beria ordered all camp commanders to line their fences with a no-man's-land, a strip of earth no less than 5 meters (15 feet) wide.<sup>10</sup> Guards regularly raked the no-man's-land in summer and deliberately left it covered with snow in winter, in order that the footprints of escaping prisoners might always be visible. The beginning of the no-man's-land was also marked, sometimes by barbed wire, sometimes by signs reading "*zapretnaya zona*," "forbidden zone." The no-man's-land was sometimes called the "death zone," since guards were permitted to shoot anyone who entered it.<sup>11</sup>

And yet—the fences and walls and dogs and barricades that surrounded *lagpunkts* were not totally impenetrable. Whereas German concentration camps were completely self-contained—"sealed off totally, hermetically," is how one expert puts it<sup>12</sup>—the Soviet system was in this sense different.

To begin with, the Soviet system classified prisoners as *konvoyni* or *beskonvoyni*—"guarded" or "unguarded"—and the small minority of unguarded prisoners were allowed to cross over the boundary without being watched, to run errands for the guards, to work during the day on an unguarded bit of railway, even to live in private apartments outside the *zona*. This latter privilege had been established early in the history of the camps, in the more chaotic years of the early 1930s.<sup>13</sup> Although it was explicitly for-

bidden several times after that, it persisted. One set of rules written in 1939 reminded camp commanders that "all prisoners, without exception, are forbidden to live outside the zone in villages, private apartments, or houses belonging to the camp." Theoretically, camps needed to get special permission even to let inmates live in a guarded accommodation, if it was outside the *zona*.<sup>14</sup> In practice, these rules were frequently disregarded. Despite the edict of 1939, inspectors' reports written long after that date list a wide variety of violations. In the city of Ordzhonikidze, one inspector complained, prisoners walked around the streets, went to bazaars, entered private apartments, drank, and stole. In one Leningrad prison colony, a prisoner had been given use of a horse, on which he escaped. In work colony No. 14 in Voronezh, an armed guard left thirty-eight prisoners standing on the street while he went into a shop.<sup>15</sup>

The Moscow prosecutors' office wrote a letter to another camp, near the Siberian city of Komsomolsk, accusing commanders of allowing no less than 1,763 prisoners to attain the status of "unguarded." As a result, the prosecutors wrote angrily, "it is always possible to meet prisoners in any part of the town, in any institution, and in private apartments."<sup>16</sup> They also accused another camp of letting 150 prisoners live in private apartments, a violation of the regime, which had led to "incidents of drunkenness, hooliganism, and even robbery of the local population."<sup>17</sup>

But within camps, prisoners were not deprived of all freedom of movement either. On the contrary, this is one of the quirks of the concentration camp, one of the ways in which it differs from a prison: when not working, and when not sleeping, most prisoners could walk in and out of the barracks at will. When not working, prisoners could also decide, within limits, how to spend their time. Only those prisoners subjected to the *katorga* regime, set up in 1943, or later those put in the "special regime camps," created in 1948, were locked into their barracks at night, a circumstance they bitterly resented and later rebelled against.<sup>18</sup>

Arriving in the camps from claustrophobic Soviet prisons, inmates were often surprised and relieved by this change. One *zek* said of his arrival in Ukhtpchlag: "Our mood was wonderful, once we got into the open air."<sup>19</sup> Olga Adamova-Sliozberg remembered talking "from dawn to dusk about the advantages of camp over prison life" upon her arrival in Magadan:

The camp population (around a thousand women) seemed to us enormous: so many people, so many conversations to have, so many potential

friends! Then there was nature. Within the compound, which was fenced with barbed wire, we could walk around freely, gaze at the sky and the faraway hills, go up to the stunted trees and stroke them with our hands. We breathed the moist sea air, felt the August drizzle on our faces, sat on the damp grass and let the earth run through our fingers. For four years we had lived without doing all this and discovered in doing so that it was essential to our being: without it you ceased to feel like a normal person.<sup>20</sup>

Leonid Finkelstein concurs:

You were brought in, you got out of the prison van, and you are surprised by several things. First, that the prisoners are walking around, without guards—they were going somewhere on their duties, whatever. Second, they look completely different from you. The contrast was even greater felt when I was in the camp and they would deliver new prisoners. The new prisoners all have green faces—green faces because of the lack of fresh air, miserable food, and all that. The prisoners in the camps have more or less normal complexions. You find yourself among relatively free, relatively good-looking people.<sup>21</sup>

Over time, the apparent "freedom" of this camp life usually palled. While in prison, wrote a Polish prisoner, Kazimierz Zarod, it was still possible to believe that a mistake had been made, that release would come soon. After all, "we were still surrounded by the trappings of civilization—outside the walls of the prison there was a large town." In the camp, however, he found himself milling freely about among a "strange assortment of men . . . all feelings of normality were suspended. As the days went by I was filled by a sort of panic which slowly turned into desperation. I tried to push the feeling down, back into the depths of consciousness, but slowly it began to dawn on me that I was caught up in a cynical act of injustice from which there appeared to be no escape . . ."<sup>22</sup>

Worse, this freedom of movement could easily and quickly turn to anarchy. Guards and camp authorities were plentiful enough inside the *lag-punkt* during the day, but they often disappeared completely at night. One or two would remain within the *vakhta*, but the rest withdrew to the other side of the fence. Only when prisoners believed their lives were in danger, did they sometimes turn to the guards in the *vakhta*. One memoirist recalls

that in the aftermath of a brawl between political and criminal prisoners—a common phenomenon of the postwar period, as we shall see—the criminal losers “ran to the *vakhta*,” begging for help. They were sent away on a transport to another *lagpunkt* the following day, as the camp administration preferred to avoid mass murder.<sup>23</sup> Another woman, feeling herself in danger of rape and possibly murder at the hands of a criminal prisoner, “turned herself in” to the *vakhta*, and asked to be placed in the camp punishment cell for the night for protection.<sup>24</sup>

The *vakhta* was not a reliable zone of safety, however. The guards residing within the guardhouse did not necessarily react to prisoners’ requests. Informed of some outrage committed by one group of prisoners against the other, they were just as likely to laugh. There are records, in both official documents and memoirs, of armed guards ignoring or laughing off cases of murder, torture, and rape among prisoners. Describing a gang rape that took place at one of the Kargopolag *lagpunkts* at night, Gustav Herljing writes that the victim “let out a short, throaty cry, full of tears and muffled by her skirt. A sleepy voice called from the watch-tower: ‘Come, come boys, what are you doing? Have you no shame?’ The eight men pulled the girl behind the latrines, and continued . . .”<sup>25</sup>

In theory, the rules were strict: the prisoners were to stay inside the *zona*. In practice, the rules were broken. And behavior that did not technically violate the rules, no matter how violent or harmful, was not necessarily punished.

#### REZHIM: RULES FOR LIVING

The *zona* controlled the prisoners’ movement in space.<sup>26</sup> But it was the *rezhim*—or “regime,” as it is usually translated into English—that controlled their time. Put simply, the regime was the set of rules and procedures according to which the camp operated. If barbed wire limited a *zek*’s freedom of movement to the *zona*, a series of orders and sirens regulated the hours he spent there.

The regime differed in its severity from *lagpunkt* to *lagpunkt*, both according to shifting priorities and according to the type of prisoner being held in a particular camp. There were, at various times, light-regime camps for invalids, ordinary-regime camps, special-regime camps, and punishment-regime camps. But the basic system remained the same. The regime deter-

mined when and how the prisoner should wake; how he should be marched to work; when and how he should receive food; when and for how long he should sleep.

In most camps, the prisoner’s day officially began with the *razvod*: the procedure of organizing the prisoners into brigades and then marching them to work. A siren or other signal would awake them. A second siren warned them that breakfast was finished, and work was to begin. Prisoners then lined up in front of the camp gates for the morning count. Valery Frid, a scriptwriter for Soviet films and the author of an unusually lively memoir, has described the scene:

The brigades would organize themselves in front of the gate. The work-assigner would hold a narrow, smoothly planed signboard: on it would be written the number of the brigades, the number of workers (there were paper shortages, and the numbers could be scraped off the signboard with glass and rewritten the following day). The convoy guard and the work-assigner would check whether everyone was in place, and if they were—they would be taken off to work. If someone were missing, everyone would have to wait, while they searched for the shirker.<sup>27</sup>

According to instructions from Moscow, this wait was not meant to last more than fifteen minutes.<sup>28</sup> Of course, as Kazimierz Zarod writes, it often lasted much longer, bad weather notwithstanding:

By 3:30 a.m. we were supposed to be in the middle of the square, standing in ranks of five, waiting to be counted. The guards often made mistakes, and then there had to be a second count. On a morning when it was snowing this was a long, cold agonizing process. If the guards were wide awake and concentrating, the count usually took about thirty minutes, but if they miscounted, we could stand for anything up to an hour.<sup>29</sup>

While this was happening, some camps took countermeasures to “raise the prisoners’ spirits.” Here is Frid again: “Our *razvod* took place to the accompaniment of an accordion player. A prisoner, freed from all other work obligations, played cheerful melodies . . .”<sup>30</sup> Zarod also records the bizarre phenomenon of the morning band, composed of prisoner musicians, both professional and amateur:

Each morning, the "band" stood near the gate playing military-style music and we were exhorted to march out "strongly and happily" to our day's work. Having played until the end of the column had passed through the gate, the musicians abandoned their instruments and, tacking themselves on to the end of the column, joined the workers walking into the forest.<sup>31</sup>

From there, prisoners were marched to work. The guards shouted out the daily command—"A step to the right, or a step to the left, will be considered an attempt to escape—The convoy will fire without warning—March!"—and the prisoners marched, still five abreast, to the workplace. If it was a great distance, they would be accompanied by guards and dogs. The procedure for the evening's return to camp was much the same. After an hour for supper, again prisoners were lined up in rows. And again, the guards counted (if the prisoners were lucky) and re-counted (if they were not). Moscow's instructions allotted more time for the evening count—thirty to forty minutes—presumably on the grounds that an escape from camp was more likely to have taken place from the work site.<sup>32</sup> Then another siren sounded, and it was time to sleep.

These rules and timetables were not written in stone. On the contrary, the regime changed over time, generally growing harsher. Jacques Rossi has written that "the main trait of the Soviet penitentiary regime is its systematic intensification, gradual introduction of unadulterated, arbitrary sadism into the status of the law," and there is something to this.<sup>33</sup> Throughout the 1940s, the regime grew tighter, workdays grew longer, rest days became less frequent. In 1931, the prisoners of the Vaigach Expedition, a part of the Ukhtinskaya Expedition, worked six-hour days, in three shifts. Workers in the Kolyma region in the early 1930s also worked normal hours, fewer in winter and more in summer.<sup>34</sup> Within the decade, however, the working day had doubled in length. By the late 1930s, women at Elinor Olitskaya's sewing factory worked "twelve hours in an unventilated hall," and the Kolyma workday had also been lengthened to twelve hours.<sup>35</sup> Later still, Olitskaya worked on a construction brigade: fourteen- to sixteen-hour days, with five-minute breaks at 10 a.m. and 4 p.m., and a one-hour lunch break at noon.<sup>36</sup>

Nor was she alone. In 1940, the Gulag's working day was officially extended to eleven hours, although even this was often violated.<sup>37</sup> In March 1942, the Moscow Gulag administration mailed a furious letter to all camp commanders, reminding them of the rule that "prisoners must be allowed

to sleep no less than eight hours." Many camp commanders had ignored this rule, the letter explained, and had allowed their prisoners as little as four or five hours of sleep every night. As a result, the Gulag complained, "prisoners are losing their ability to work, they are becoming 'weak workers' and invalids."<sup>38</sup>

Violations continued, particularly as production demands accelerated during the war years. In September 1942, after the German invasion, the Gulag's administration officially extended the working day for prisoners building airport facilities to twelve hours, with a one-hour break for lunch. The pattern was the same all over the USSR. Working days of sixteen hours were recorded in Vyatlag during the war.<sup>39</sup> Working days of twelve hours were recorded in Vorkuta in the summer of 1943, although these were reduced—probably because of the high rates of death and illness—to ten hours again in March 1944.<sup>40</sup> Sergei Bondarevsky, a prisoner in a wartime *sharashka*, one of the special laboratories for inmate scientists, also remembered working eleven-hour days, with breaks. On a typical day, he worked from 8 a.m. until 2 p.m., from 4 p.m. until 7 p.m., and then again from 8 p.m. until 10 p.m.<sup>41</sup>

In any case, the rules were often broken. One *zek*, assigned to a brigade, panning gold in Kolyma, had to sift through 150 wheelbarrows a day. Those who had not finished that amount by the end of the workday simply remained until they had—sometimes as late as midnight. Afterward they would go home, eat their soup, and be up at 5 a.m. to start work again.<sup>42</sup> The Norilsk camp administration applied a similar principle in the late 1940s, where another prisoner worked digging foundations for new buildings in the permafrost: "At the end of twelve hours they would winch you out of the hole, but only if you had completed your work. If you hadn't, you were just left there."<sup>43</sup>

Nor were many breaks usually granted during the day, as one wartime prisoner, assigned to work in a textile factory, later explained:

At six we had to be in the factory. At ten we had a five-minute break to smoke a cigarette, for which purpose we had to run to a cellar about two hundred yards away, the only place on the factory premises where this was permitted. Infringement of this regulation was punishable with two extra years' imprisonment. At one o'clock came a half-hour break for lunch. Small earthenware bowl in hand, one had to dash frantically to the canteen,



stand in a long queue, receive some disgusting soya beans which disagreed with most people—and at all costs be back at the factory when the engines started working. After that, without leaving our places, we sat till seven in the evening.<sup>44</sup>

The number of days off work was also mandated by law. Ordinary prisoners were allowed to have one a week, and those assigned to stricter regimes two per month. But these rules also varied in practice. As early as 1933, the Gulag administration in Moscow sent out an order reminding camp commanders of the importance of prisoners' rest days, many of which were being canceled in the mad rush to fulfill the plan.<sup>45</sup> A decade later, hardly anything had changed. During the war, Kazimierz Zarod was given one day off out of ten.<sup>46</sup> Another recalled having one a month.<sup>47</sup> Gustav Herling remembered free days being even scarcer:

According to regulations, prisoners were entitled to one whole day's rest every ten days' work. But in practice, it transpired that even a monthly day off threatened to lower the camp's production output, and it had therefore become customary to announce ceremoniously the reward of a rest day whenever the camp had surpassed its production plan for the one particular quarter . . . Naturally we had no opportunity to inspect the output figures or the production plan, so that this convention was a fiction which in fact put us entirely at the mercy of the camp authorities.<sup>48</sup>

Even on their rare days off, it sometimes happened that prisoners were forced to do maintenance work within the camp, cleaning barracks, cleaning toilets, clearing snow in the winter.<sup>49</sup> All of which makes one order, issued by Lazar Kogan, the commander of Dmitlag, particularly poignant. Disturbed by the many reports of camp horses collapsing of exhaustion, Kogan began by noting that: "The growing number of cases of illness and collapse of horses has several causes, including the overloading of horses, the difficult conditions of the roads, and the absence of full and complete rest time for horses to recover their strength."

He then continued, issuing new instructions:

1. The workday of camp horses must not exceed ten hours, not counting the obligatory two-hour break for rest and food.
2. On average, horses must not walk more than 32 kilometers per day.

3. Horses must be allowed a regular rest day, every eighth day, and the rest on that day must be complete.<sup>50</sup>

Of the prisoners' need for a regular rest day every eighth day, there is, alas, no mention.

#### BARAKI: LIVING SPACE

Most prisoners in most camps lived in barracks. Rare was the camp, however, whose barracks were constructed before the prisoners arrived. Those prisoners who had the bad luck to be sent to build a new camp lived in tents, or in nothing at all. As one prisoners' song put it;

We drove quickly and fast across tundra  
When suddenly, the train came to a halt.  
Around us, only forest and mud—  
And here we will build the canal.<sup>51</sup>

Ivan Sulimov, a prisoner in Vorkuta in the 1930s, was dumped, along with a party of inmates, on "a flat square of land in the polar tundra," and told to set up tents, build a bonfire, and begin construction of a "fence of stone slabs, surrounded by barbed wire" as well as barracks.<sup>52</sup> Janusz Sieminski, a Polish prisoner in Kolyma after the war, was also once part of a team that constructed a new *lagpunkt* "from zero," in the depths of winter. At night, prisoners slept on the ground. Many died, particularly those who lost the battle to sleep near the fire.<sup>53</sup> Prisoners arriving in the Prikaspsky camp in Azerbaijan in December 1940 also slept, in the words of an annoyed NKVD inspector, "beneath the open sky on damp ground."<sup>54</sup> Nor were such situations necessarily temporary. As late as 1955, prisoners in some camps were still living in tents.<sup>55</sup>

If and when the prisoners did build barracks, they were invariably extremely simple buildings, made of wood. Moscow dictated their design and, as a result, descriptions of them are rather repetitive: prisoner after prisoner describes long, rectangular, wooden buildings, the walls unplastered, the cracks stopped up with mud, the inside space filled with rows and rows of equally poorly made bunk beds. Sometimes there was a crude table, sometimes not. Sometimes there were benches to sit on, sometimes not.<sup>56</sup> In



*In the Barracks:* inmates listening to a prisoner musician—a drawing by Benjamin Mkrtchyan, Ivdel, 1953

Kolyma, and in other regions where wood was scarce, the prisoners built barracks, equally cheaply and hastily, of stone. Where insulation was not available, older methods were used. Photographs of the barracks in Vorkuta, taken in the winter of 1945, make them look almost invisible: their roofs had been built at sharp angles, but very low to the ground, so the snow accumulating around them would help insulate them from cold.<sup>57</sup>

Often, barracks were not proper buildings at all, but rather *zemlyanki*, or “earth dugouts.” A. P. Evstonichev lived in one in Karelia, in the early 1940s:

A *zemlyanka*—it was a space cleaned of snow, with the upper layer of earth removed. The walls and roof were made of round, rough logs. The whole structure was covered with another layer of earth and snow. The entrance to the dugout was decked out with a canvas door . . . in one corner stood a

barrel of water. In the middle stood a metal stove, complete with a metal pipe leading out through the roof, and a barrel of kerosene.<sup>58</sup>

In the temporary *lagpunkts* constructed alongside the building sites of roads and railways, *zemlyanki* were ubiquitous. As discussed in Chapter 4, their traces still line the prisoner-built roads of the far north today, as well as the riverbanks near the older sections of the city of Vorkuta. Sometimes prisoners lived in tents as well. One memoir of the early days of Vorkutlag describes the construction, in the course of three days, of “fifteen tents with three-level bunk-beds” for 100 prisoners apiece, as well as a *zona* with four watchtowers and a barbed-wire fence.<sup>59</sup>

But the real barracks rarely lived up to the low standards that Moscow had set for them either. They were almost always terribly overcrowded, even after the chaos of the late 1930s had subsided. An inspection report of twenty-three camps, written in 1948, noted angrily that in most of them “prisoners have no more than one to one and a half meters of living space per person,” and even that was in an unsanitary condition: “prisoners do not have their own places to sleep, or their own sheets and blankets.”<sup>60</sup> Sometimes there was even less space than that. Margarete Buber-Neumann records that on her arrival in camp, there was actually no sleeping space at all within the barracks, and she was forced to spend the first few nights on the floor of the washroom.<sup>61</sup>

Ordinary prisoners were meant to be given beds known as *wagonki*, a name taken from the beds found on the wagons of passenger trains. These were double-decker bunks, with room for two inmates at each level, four inmates in all. In many camps, prisoners slept on the even less sophisticated *sploshnye nary*. These were long wooden sleeping shelves, not even partitioned into separate bunks. Prisoners assigned to them simply lay down beside one another, in a long row. Because these communal beds were considered unhygienic, camp inspectors constantly inveighed against them too. In 1948, the central Gulag administration issued a directive demanding that they all be replaced by *wagonki*.<sup>62</sup> Nevertheless, Anna Andreeva, a prisoner in Mordovia in the late 1940s and early 1950s, slept on *sploshnye nary*, and remembers that many prisoners still slept on the floor beneath them too.<sup>63</sup>

Bedding was also arbitrary, and varied greatly from camp to camp, despite further strict (and rather modest) rules issued in Moscow. Regulations

stated that all prisoners should have a new towel every year, a pillowcase every four years, sheets every two years, and a blanket every five years.<sup>64</sup> In practice, "a so-called straw mattress went with each prisoner's bed," wrote Elinor Lipper:

There was no straw in it and rarely hay, because there was not enough hay for the cattle; instead it contained wood shavings or extra clothes, if a prisoner still owned any extra clothes. In addition, there was a woolen blanket and pillowcase which you could stuff with whatever you had, for there were no pillows.<sup>65</sup>

Others had nothing at all. As late as 1950, Isaak Filshinsky, an Arabic specialist arrested in 1948, was still sleeping beneath his coat in Kargopollog, with spare rags for pillows.<sup>66</sup>

The 1948 directive also called for all earthen floors in barracks to be replaced by wooden floors. But as late as the 1950s, Irena Arginskaya lived in a barrack whose floor could not be cleaned properly as it was made of clay.<sup>67</sup> Even if floors were wooden, they could often not be cleaned properly for lack of brushes. Describing her experiences to a postwar commission, one Polish woman explained that in her camp, a group of prisoners were always put "on duty" at night, cleaning up the barracks and lavatories while others slept: "The mud on the barrack floor had to be scraped off with knives. The Russian women were frantic at our being unable to do it, and asked us how we had lived at home. It did not even occur to them that the dirtiest floor can be scrubbed with a brush."<sup>68</sup>

Heating and light were often equally primitive, but again this varied greatly from camp to camp. One prisoner remembered the barracks being virtually dark: "the electric lamps shone yellow-white, barely noticeable, and the kerosene lamps smoked and smelled rancid."<sup>69</sup> Others complained of the opposite problem, that the lights were usually on all night.<sup>70</sup> Some prisoners in the camps of the Vorkuta region had no problem with heat, since they could bring lumps of coal home from the mines, but Susanna Pechora, in a *lagpunkt* near the coal mines of Inta, remembered that inside the barracks it was "so cold in the winter that your hair freezes to the bed, the drinking water freezes in the cup."<sup>71</sup> There was no running water in her barracks either, just water brought into the barracks in buckets by the *dezhurnaya*—an older woman, no longer capable of heavier work—who cleaned and looked after the barracks during the day.<sup>72</sup>

Worse, a "terrible heavy smell" pervaded the barracks, thanks to the huge quantities of dirty and mildewed clothes drying along the edge of the bunks, the tables, anywhere it was possible to hang something. In those barracks in the special camps where the doors were closed at night and the windows barred, the stench made it "almost impossible to breathe."<sup>73</sup>

The air quality was not improved by the absence of toilets. In camps where prisoners were locked into their barracks at night, *zeks* had to make use of a *parasha*, or "bucket," just as in prison. One prisoner wrote that in the morning the *parasha* was "impossible to carry, so it was dragged along across the slippery floor. The contents invariably spilled out."<sup>74</sup> Another, Galina Smirnova, arrested in the early 1950s, remembered that "if it was something serious, you waited until morning, otherwise there was a terrible stench."<sup>75</sup>

Otherwise, toilets were outhouses, and outhouses were outside the barracks, often some distance away, which was a serious hardship in the winter cold. "There were wooden outdoor toilets," said Smirnova of another camp, "even when it was 30 or 40 degrees below zero."<sup>76</sup> Thomas Sgovio wrote of the consequences:

Outside, in front of each barrack, they stuck a wooden pole and froze it to the ground. Another decree! We were forbidden to urinate anywhere on camp grounds other than the outhouses or on the pole with a white rag tied to the top. Anyone caught violating the decree would be sentenced to ten nights in the penal cell . . . The decree was issued because at night there were prisoners who, unwilling to walk the long distance to the outhouses, urinated instead all over the well-beaten snow paths. The grounds were littered with yellow spots. When the snow melted in late spring, there would be a terrible stench . . . twice a month we chopped the frozen pyramids and carted the frozen pieces out of the zone . . .<sup>77</sup>

But filth and overcrowding were not merely aesthetic problems, or matters of relatively minor discomfort. The crowded bunks and the lack of space could also be lethal, particularly in camps that worked on a twenty-four-hour schedule. In one such camp, where the prisoners worked three separate shifts, day and night, one memoirist wrote that "people were asleep in the barracks at any time of the day. Fighting to be able to sleep was a fight for life. Arguing over sleep, people swore at one another, fought one another, even killed one another. The radio in the barracks was on at full strength at all times, and was much hated."<sup>78</sup>

Precisely because the question of where one slept was so crucial, sleeping conditions were always an extremely important tool of prisoner control, and the camp administration consciously used them as such. In their central archives in Moscow, the Gulag's archivists carefully preserved photographs of different types of barracks, intended for different types of prisoners. The barracks of the *otlichniki*—the “excellent ones” or “shock-workers”—have single beds with mattresses and blankets, wooden floors, and pictures on the walls. The prisoners are, if not exactly smiling for the photographers, then at least reading newspapers and looking well-fed. The *rezhim* barracks, on the other hand—the punishment barracks for poor or unruly workers—have wooden planks on crude wooden pegs instead of beds. Even in these photographs, taken for propaganda purposes, the *rezhim* prisoners have no mattresses, and are shown sharing blankets.<sup>79</sup>

In some camps, the etiquette surrounding sleeping arrangements became quite elaborate. Space was at such a premium that the possession of space, and of privacy, were considered great privileges, accorded only to those who ranked among the camp's aristocracy. Higher-ranking prisoners—brigade leaders, norm-setters, and others—were often permitted to sleep in smaller barracks, with fewer people. Solzhenitsyn, initially assigned the job of “works manager” upon his arrival at a camp in Moscow, was given a place in a barracks where

instead of multiple bunks there were ordinary cots and one bed table for every two persons, not for a whole brigade. During the day the door was locked and you could leave your things there. Last, there was a half-legal electric hot plate, and it was not necessary to go and crowd around the big common stove in the yard.<sup>80</sup>

This was all considered high luxury. Certain, more desirable jobs—that of a carpenter, or a tool repairman—also came with the much sought-after right to sleep in the workshop. Anna Rozina slept in the cobbler's workshop when she worked as a cobbler in the Temnikovskiy camp, and had the “right” to go to the baths more often as well, all of which counted as great privileges.<sup>81</sup>

In almost every camp, doctors, even prisoner doctors, were also allowed to sleep separately, a privilege which reflected their special status. Isaac Vogelfanger, a surgeon, felt himself privileged because he was allowed to sleep in a bunk bed in a “small room adjacent to the reception area” of his

camp's infirmary: “the moon seemed to be smiling upon me as I went to sleep.” Along with him slept the camp's *feldsher*, or “medical assistant,” who had the same privilege.<sup>82</sup>

Sometimes, special living conditions were arranged for invalids. The actress Tatyana Okunevskaya managed to get sent to an invalid's camp in Lithuania, where “the barracks were long, with many windows, light, clean, and no upper bunks above your head.”<sup>83</sup> The prisoners sent to work on Beria's *sharashki*—the “special bureaus” for talented engineers and technicians—received the best sleeping quarters of all. In Bolshevo, a *sharashka* just outside of Moscow, barracks were “large, light, clean and heated by dutch ovens” rather than metal stoves. The beds had linen and pillows, the light was turned off at night, and there was a private shower.<sup>84</sup> Prisoners who lived in these special quarters knew, of course, that they could easily be taken away, which enhanced their interest in working hard.

Informally, there was often another hierarchy at work within barracks as well. In most barracks, the critical decisions about who slept where were taken by those groups in the camps that were the strongest and most united. Until the late 1940s, when the big national groups—the Ukrainians, Balts, Chechens, Poles—grew stronger, the best-organized prisoners were usually the convicted criminals, as we shall see. As a rule, they therefore slept in the top bunks, where there was better air and more space, clubbing and kicking those who objected. Those who slept on the lower bunks had less clout. Those who slept on the floor—the lowest-ranking prisoners in the camp—suffered most, remembered one prisoner:

This level was called the “*kolkhoz* sector,” and it was to this level that the thieves forced the *kolkhozniki*—various aged intellectuals and priests, that is, and even some of their own, who had broken the thieves' moral code. On to them fell not only things from the upper and lower bunks: the thieves also poured slops, water, yesterday's soup. And the *kolkhoz* sector had to tolerate all of this, for if they complained they would receive even more filth . . . people became sick, suffocated, lost consciousness, went crazy, died of typhus, dysentery, killed themselves.<sup>85</sup>

Prisoners, even political prisoners, could nevertheless better their circumstances. While working as a *feldsher*, Karol Colonna-Czosnowski, a Polish political prisoner, was picked out of an extremely crowded barrack by Grisha, the criminal “boss” of the camp: “He gave a majestic kick to one

of his courtiers who took it for an order to make room for me and promptly abandoned his seat. I was embarrassed and protested that I would rather not sit so near the fire, but this was not in conformity with my host's wishes, as I discovered when one of Grisha's followers gave me a mighty push." When he had regained his balance, he found himself sitting on the couch at Grisha's feet: "This was, apparently, where he wanted me to remain . . ."86 Colonna-Czosnowski did not argue. Even for a few hours, where one sat, or laid one's head, mattered intensely.

### BANYA: THE BATHHOUSE

Dirt, crowding, and poor hygiene led to a plague of bedbugs and lice. In the 1930s, a "humorous" cartoon in *Perekovka*, the newspaper of the Moscow-Volga Canal, featured a *zek* being handed new clothes. Beneath was the caption, "They give you 'clean' clothes, but they are full of lice." Another was captioned "And while you sleep in the barracks, the bedbugs bite like black crabs."<sup>87</sup> Nor did the problem lessen over the years. One Polish prisoner records that, during the war, his camp acquaintance became obsessed with them: "As a biologist, he was interested in how many lice could subsist on a certain space. Counting them on his shirt he found sixty, and an hour later another sixty."<sup>88</sup>

By the 1940s, the Gulag's masters had long recognized the lethal danger of louse-borne typhus and, officially, conducted a constant battle against parasites. Baths were supposedly mandatory every ten days. All clothing was supposed to be boiled in disinfection units, both on entering the camp and then at regular intervals, to destroy all vermin.<sup>89</sup> As we have seen, camp barbers shaved the entire bodies of both men and women on entry into the camps, and their heads regularly thereafter. Soap, albeit tiny amounts of it, was regularly included in lists of products to be distributed to prisoners: in 1944, for example, this amounted to 200 grams per month, per prisoner. Women, prisoners' children, and prisoners in hospitals were allotted an extra 50 grams, juveniles received an extra 100 grams, and prisoners working at "especially dirty jobs" received an extra 200 grams. These tiny slivers were meant both for personal hygiene and for the washing of linen and clothes.<sup>90</sup> (Soap did not become any less scarce, inside or outside the camps. As late as 1991, Soviet coal miners went on strike because, among other things, they had no soap.)

Nevertheless, not everyone was convinced of the efficacy of the camp's delousing procedures. In practice, wrote one prisoner, "the baths seemed to increase the lice's sexual vigor."<sup>91</sup> Varlam Shalamov went further: "Not only was the delousing absolutely useless, no lice are killed by this disinfection chamber. It's only a formality and the apparatus has been created for the purpose of tormenting the convict still more."<sup>92</sup>

Technically, Shalamov was wrong. The apparatus was not created for the purpose of tormenting convicts—as I say, the Gulag's central administration in Moscow really did write very strict directives, instructing camp commanders to do battle against parasites, and countless inspection reports inveigh against their failure to do so. A 1933 account of the conditions in Dmitlag angrily complains about the women's barracks, which were "dirty, lacking sheets and blankets; the women complain of a massive quantity of bedbugs, which the Sanitation Division is not fighting against."<sup>93</sup> A 1940 investigation into the conditions at one group of northern camps furiously described "lice in the barracks, and bedbugs, which have a negative impact on the prisoners' ability to rest" at one *lagpunkt*, while the Novosibirsk corrective labor camp had "100 percent lice infection among prisoners . . . as a result of poor sanitary conditions, there is a high level of skin diseases and stomach ailments . . . from this it is clear that the unsanitary conditions of the camp are very, very costly."

Meanwhile, typhus had broken out twice at another *lagpunkt*, while in others, prisoners were "black with dirt," the report continued with great agitation.<sup>94</sup> Complaints about lice, and angry orders to eliminate them, figure year in and year out in the inspection reports submitted by Gulag prosecutors.<sup>95</sup> After one typhus epidemic at Temlag in 1937, both the head of the *lagpunkt* and the deputy of the camp medical department were fired, accused of "criminal negligence and inactivity," and put on trial.<sup>96</sup> Reward was used as well as punishment: in 1933, the inhabitants of one prisoners' barrack in Dmitlag received holidays from work as a prize for having cleared all of their beds of bedbugs.<sup>97</sup>

Prisoners' refusal to bathe was also taken very seriously. Irena Arginskaya, who was in a special camp for politicals at Kengir in the early 1950s, recalled a particular women's religious sect in the camp which refused, for reasons known only to itself, to bathe:

One day I had remained in the barracks because I was ill, and had been let off work. A guard came in, however, and told us that all of the sick pris-

oners would have to help wash the “nuns.” The scene was as follows: a wagon pulled up to their section of the barracks, and we had to carry them out and put them on the wagon. They protested, kicked us and hit us, and so on. But when we finally got them on the wagon they lay quietly, and didn’t try to escape. Then we pulled the wagon to the baths, where we took them off and carried them inside, undressed them—and then understood why the camp administration couldn’t allow them not to bathe. As you took their clothes off, lice fell off them in handfuls. Then we put them under water, and washed them. Meanwhile, their clothes were boiled to kill the lice . . .<sup>98</sup>

Arginskaya also remembers that “in principle it was possible to go to the baths as much as you wanted” in Kengir, where there were no restrictions on water. Similarly, Leonid Sitko, a former prisoner of war in Germany, reckoned that Soviet camps had fewer lice than German camps. He spent time in both Steplag and Minlag, where “you could bathe as much as you wanted . . . you could even wash your clothes.”<sup>99</sup> Certain factories and work sites had their own showers, as Isaak Filshtinsky found in Kargopolag, where prisoners could use them during the day, even though other prisoners suffered from lack of water.<sup>100</sup>

Yet Shalamov was not entirely wrong either in his cynical description of the hygiene system. For even if they were instructed to take bathing seriously, it often happened that local camp administrators merely observed the rituals of delousing and bathing, without appearing to care much about the result. Either there was not enough coal to keep the disinfection apparatus hot enough; or those in charge could not be bothered to do it properly; or there were no soap rations issued for months on end; or the rations were stolen. At the Dizelny *lagpunkt* in Kolyma, on bath days they “gave every prisoner a small sliver of soap and a large mug of warm water. They poured five or six of these mugs into a tub, and that sufficed for everyone, for the washing and rinsing of five or six people.” At the Sopka *lagpunkt*, “water was brought there, like other freight, along the narrow railway and narrow road. In the winter they got it from snow, although there wasn’t much snow there, the wind blew it away . . . Workers came back from the mine covered in dust, and there were no sinks to wash in.”<sup>101</sup>

Frequently, guards were bored by the process of bathing the prisoners, and allowed them only a few minutes in the baths, for formality’s sake.<sup>102</sup> At a Siblag *lagpunkt* in 1941, an outraged inspector found that “prisoners have

not bathed for two months,” thanks to the sheer disinterest of the guards.<sup>103</sup> And in the worst camps, open neglect of the prisoners’ humanity did indeed make bathing a torture. Many describe the awfulness of bathing, but none quite so well as, again, Shalamov, who devotes an entire short story to the horrors of the baths of Kolyma. Despite their exhaustion, prisoners would have to wait for hours to take their turn: “Bathhouse sessions are arranged either before or after work. After many hours of work in the cold (and it’s no easier in the summer) when all thoughts and hopes are concentrated on the desire to reach one’s bunk and food so as to fall asleep as soon as possible, the bath-house delay is almost unendurable.”

First, the *zeks* would stand in lines, outside in the cold; then they would be herded into crowded dressing rooms, built for fifteen people and containing up to a hundred. All the while they knew that their barracks were being cleaned and searched. Their meager possessions, including crockery and footrags, were being tossed into the snow:

It is characteristic of man, be he beggar or Nobel laureate, that he quickly acquires petty things. The same is true of the convict. He is, after all, a working man and needs a needle and material for patches, and an extra bowl perhaps. All this is cast out and then re-accumulated after each bath-house day, unless it is buried somewhere deep in the snow.

Once inside the baths themselves, there was often so little water that it was impossible to get clean. Prisoners were given “a wooden basin with not very hot water . . . there is no extra water and no one can buy any.” Nor were the bathhouses heated: “The feeling of cold is increased by a thousand drafts from under the doors, from the cracks. The baths were not fully heated; they had cracks in the walls.” Inside, there is also “constant uproar accompanied by smoke, crowding, and shouting; there’s even a common turn of speech: ‘to shout as in the bathhouse.’”<sup>104</sup>

Thomas Sgovio also describes this hellish scene, writing that prisoners in Kolyma sometimes had to be beaten in order to make them go to the baths:

The waiting outside in the frost for those inside to come out—then came the changing room where it was cold—the compulsory disinfections and fumigating process where we tossed our rags in a heap—you never got your own back—the fighting and swearing, “you son-of-a-bitch that’s my

jacket"—selecting the damp, collective underwear filled with lice eggs in the seams—the shaving of hairs on the body by the Camp Barber . . . then, when it was finally our turn to enter the washing room, we picked up a wooden tub, received a cup of hot water, a cup of cold water, and a small piece of black, evil-smelling soap . . .<sup>105</sup>

Then, after it was all over, the same humiliating process of handing out clothes began all over again, wrote Shalamov, ever-obsessive on the issue of underwear: "Having washed themselves, the men gather at the window far in advance of the actual distribution of underwear. Over and over again they discuss in detail the underwear they received last time, the underwear received five years ago in Bamlag . . ."<sup>106</sup>

Inevitably, the right to bathe in relative comfort also became intimately intertwined with the system of privilege. In Tendlag, for example, those employed in particular jobs had the right to bathe more often.<sup>107</sup> The very job of bathhouse worker, which implied both proximity to clean water and the right to allow or deny others such proximity, was usually one of the most sought-after jobs in the camp. In the end, despite the strictest, severest, and most drastic orders from Moscow, prisoners' comfort, hygiene, and health were completely dependent on local whims and circumstances.

Thus was another aspect of ordinary life turned inside out, turned from a simple pleasure into what Shalamov calls "a negative event, a burden in the convict's life . . . a testimony of that shift of values which is the main quality that the camp instills in its inmates . . ."<sup>108</sup>

#### STOLOVAYA: THE DINING HALL

The vast Gulag literature contains many varied descriptions of camps, and reflects the experiences of a wide range of personalities. But one aspect of camp life remains consistent from camp to camp, from year to year, from memoir to memoir: the descriptions of the *balanda*, the soup that prisoners were served once or sometimes twice a day.

Universally, former prisoners agree that the taste of the daily or twice-daily half-liter of prison soup was revolting; its consistency was watery, and its contents were suspect. Galina Levinson wrote that it was made "from spoiled cabbage and potatoes, sometimes with a piece of pig fat, sometimes with herring heads."<sup>109</sup> Barbara Armonas remembered soup made from

"fish or animal lungs and a few potatoes."<sup>110</sup> Leonid Sitko described the soup as "never having any meat in it at all."<sup>111</sup>

Another prisoner remembered soup made from dog meat, which one of his co-workers, a Frenchman, could not eat: "a man from Western countries is not always able to cross a psychological barrier, even when he is starving," he concluded.<sup>112</sup> Even Lazar Kogan, the boss of Dmitlag, once complained that "Some cooks act as if they were not preparing Soviet meals, but rather pig slops. Thanks to this attitude, the food they prepare is unsuitable, and often tasteless and bland."<sup>113</sup>

Hunger was a powerful motivator nevertheless: the soup might have been inedible under normal circumstances, but in the camps, where most people were always hungry, prisoners ate it with relish. Nor was their hunger accidental: prisoners were kept hungry, because regulation of prisoners' food was, after regulation of prisoners' time and living space, the camp administration's most important tool of control.

For that reason, the distribution of food to prisoners in camps grew into quite an elaborate science. The exact norms for particular categories of prisoners and camp workers were set in Moscow, and frequently changed. The Gulag administration constantly fine-tuned its figures, calculating and recalculating the minimum quantity of food necessary for prisoners to continue working. New orders listing ration levels were issued to camp commanders with great frequency. These ultimately became long, complex documents, written in heavy, bureaucratic language.

Typical, for example, was the Gulag administration's order on rations, issued on October 30, 1944. The orders stipulated one "guaranteed" or basic norm for most prisoners: 550 grams of bread per day, 8 grams of sugar, and a collection of other products theoretically intended for use in the *balanda*, the midday soup, and in the kasha, or "porridge," served for breakfast; and supper: 75 grams of buckwheat or noodles, 15 grams of meat or meat products, 55 grams of fish or fish products, 10 grams of fat, 500 grams of potato or vegetable, 15 grams of salt, and 2 grams of "surrogate tea."

To this list of products, some notes were appended. Camp commanders were instructed to lower the bread ration of those prisoners meeting only 75 percent of the norm by 50 grams, and for those meeting only 50 percent of the norm by 100 grams. Those overfulfilling the plan, on the other hand, received an extra 50 grams of buckwheat, 25 grams of meat, and 25 grams of fish, among other things.<sup>114</sup>

By comparison, camp guards in 1942—a much hungrier year through-

out the USSR—were meant to receive 700 grams of bread, nearly a kilo of fresh vegetables, and 75 grams of meat, with special supplements for those living high above sea level.<sup>115</sup> Prisoners working in the *sharashki* during the war were even better fed, receiving, in theory, 800 grams of bread and 50 grams of meat as opposed to the 15 granted to normal prisoners. In addition, they received fifteen cigarettes per day, and matches.<sup>116</sup> Pregnant women, juvenile prisoners, prisoners of war, free workers, and children resident in camp nurseries received slightly better rations.<sup>117</sup>

Some camps experimented with even finer tuning. In July 1933, Dmitlag issued an order listing different rations for prisoners who fulfilled up to 79 percent of the norm; 80 to 89 percent of the norm; 90 to 99 percent of the norm; 100 to 109 percent of the norm; 110 to 124 percent of the norm; and 125 percent and higher.<sup>118</sup>

As one might imagine, the need to distribute these precise amounts of food to the right people in the right quantities—quantities which sometimes varied daily—required a vast bureaucracy, and many camps found it difficult to cope. They had to keep whole files full of instructions on hand, enumerating which prisoners in which situations were to receive what. Even the smallest *lagpunkts* kept copious records, listing the daily norm-fulfillments of each prisoner, and the amount of food due as a result. In the small *lagpunkt* of Kedrovyy Shor, for example—a collective farm division of Intlag—there were, in 1943, at least thirteen different food norms. The camp accountant—probably a prisoner—had to determine which norm each of the camp's 1,000 inmates should receive. On long sheets of paper, he first drew out lines by hand, in pencil, and then added the names and numbers, in pen, covering page after page after page with his calculations.<sup>119</sup>

In larger camps, the bureaucracy was even worse. The Gulag's former chief accountant, A. S. Narinsky, has described how the administrators of one camp, engaged in building one of the far northern railway lines, hit on the idea of distributing food tickets to prisoners, in order to ensure that they received the correct rations every day. But even getting hold of tickets was difficult in a system plagued by chronic paper shortages. Unable to find a better solution, they decided to use bus tickets, which took three days to arrive. This problem “constantly threatened to disorganize the entire feeding system.”<sup>120</sup>

Transporting food in winter to distant *lagpunkts* was also a problem, particularly for those camps without their own bakeries. “Even bread which

was still warm,” writes Narinsky, “when transported in a goods car for 400 kilometers in 50 degrees of frost became so frozen that it was unusable not only for human consumption, but even for fuel.”<sup>121</sup> Despite the distribution of complex instructions for storing the scant vegetables and potatoes in the north during the winter, large quantities froze and became inedible. In the summer, by contrast, meat and fish went bad, and other foods spoiled. Badly managed warehouses burned to the ground, or filled with rats.<sup>122</sup>

Many camps founded their own *kolkhoz*, or collective farm, or dairy *lagpunkts*, but these too often worked badly. One report on a camp *kolkhoz* listed, among its other problems, the lack of technically trained personnel, the lack of spare parts for the tractor, the lack of a barn for the dairy cattle, and the lack of preparation for the harvest season.<sup>123</sup>

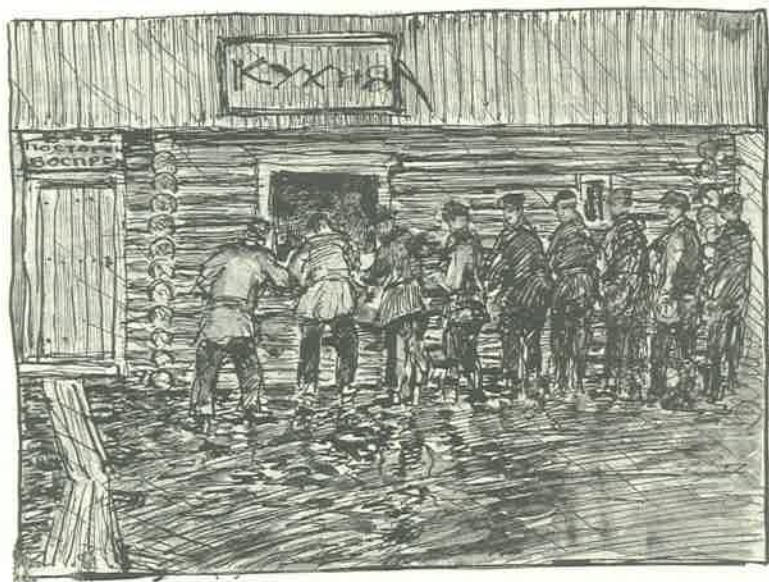
As a result, prisoners were almost always vitamin deficient, even when they were not actually starving, a problem the camp officials took more or less seriously. In the absence of actual vitamin tablets, many forced prisoners to drink *khvoya*, a foul-tasting brew made out of pine needles and of dubious efficacy.<sup>124</sup> By way of comparison, the norms for “officers of the armed forces” expressly stipulated vitamin C and dried fruit to compensate for the lack of vitamins in the regular rations. Generals and admirals were, in addition, officially able to receive cheese, caviar, canned fish, and eggs.<sup>125</sup>

Even the very process of handing out soup, with or without vitamins, could be difficult in the cold of a far northern winter, particularly if it was being served at noon, at the work site. In 1939, a Kolyma doctor actually filed a formal complaint to the camp boss, pointing out that prisoners were being made to eat their food outdoors, and that it froze while it was being eaten.<sup>126</sup> Overcrowding was a problem for food distribution too: one prisoner remembered that in the *lagpunkt* adjacent to the Maldyak mine in Magadan, there was one serving window for more than 700 people.<sup>127</sup>

Food distribution could also be disrupted by events outside the camps: during the Second World War, for example, it often ceased altogether. The worst years were 1942 and 1943, when much of the western USSR was occupied by German troops, and much of the rest of the country was preoccupied fighting them. Hunger was rife across the country—and the Gulag was not a high priority. Vladimir Petrov, a prisoner in Kolyma, recalls a period of five days without any food deliveries in his camp: “real famine set in at the mine. Five thousand men did not have a piece of bread.”

Cutlery and crockery were constantly lacking too. Petrov, again, writes





*In the Camp Kitchen*: prisoners lining up for soup—a drawing by Ivan Sykahnov, Temirtau, 1935–1937

that “soup still warm when received would become covered with ice during the period of time one man would wait for a spoon from another who had finished with one. This probably explained why the majority of the men preferred to eat without spoons.”<sup>128</sup> Another prisoner believed that she had remained alive because she “traded bread for a half-liter enamel bowl . . . If you have your own bowl, you get the first portions—and the fat is all on the top. The others have to wait until your bowl is free. You eat, then give it to another, who gives it to another . . .”<sup>129</sup>

Other prisoners made their own bowls and cutlery out of wood. The small museum housed in the headquarters of the Memorial Society in Moscow displays a number of these strangely moving items.<sup>130</sup> As ever, the central Gulag administration was fully aware of these shortages, and occasionally tried to do something about them: the authorities at one point complimented one camp for making clever use of its leftover tin cans for precisely this purpose.<sup>131</sup> But even when crockery and cutlery existed, there

was often no way to clean it: one Dमितlag order “categorically” forbade camp cooks from distributing food in dirty dishes.<sup>132</sup>

For all of these reasons, the food ration regulations issued in Moscow—already calculated to the minimum level required for survival—are not a reliable guide to what prisoners actually ate. Nor do we need to rely solely on prisoners’ memoirs to know that Soviet camp inmates were very hungry. The Gulag itself conducted periodic inspections of its camps, and kept records of what prisoners were actually eating, as opposed to what they were supposed to be eating. Again, the surreal gap between the neat lists of food rations drawn up in Moscow and the inspectors’ reports is startling.

The investigation of the camp at Volgostroi in 1942, for example, noted that at one *lagpunkt*, there were eighty cases of pellagra, a disease of malnutrition: “people are dying of starvation,” the report noted bluntly. At Siblag, a large camp in western Siberia, a Soviet deputy prosecutor found that in the first quarter of 1941, food norms had been “systematically violated: meat, fish, and fats are distributed extremely rarely . . . sugar is not distributed at all.” In the Sverdlovsk region in 1942, the food in camps contained “no fats, no fish or meat, and often no vegetables.” In Vyatlag in 1942, “the food in July was poor, nearly inedible, and lacking in vitamins. This is because of the lack of fats, meat, fish, potatoes . . . all of the food is based on flour and grain products.”<sup>133</sup>

Some prisoners, it seems, were deprived of food because the camp had not received the right deliveries. This was a permanent problem: in Kedrovyi Shor, the *lagpunkt* accountants kept a list of all food products which could be substituted for those that prisoners should have received but did not. These included not only cheese for milk, but also dried crackers for bread, wild mushrooms for meat, and wild berries for sugar.<sup>134</sup> It was hardly surprising that, as a result, the prisoners’ diet looked quite different from how it did on paper in Moscow. An inspection of Birlag in 1940 determined that “the entire lunch for working *zeks* consists of water, plus 130 grams of grain, and that the second course is black bread, about 100 grams. For breakfast and supper they reheat the same sort of soup.” In conversation with the camp cook, the inspector was also told that the “theoretical norms are never fulfilled,” that there were no deliveries of fish, meat, vegetables, or fats. The camp, concluded the report, “doesn’t have money to buy food products or clothing . . . and without money not one supply organization wants to cooperate.” More than 500 cases of scurvy were reported as a result.<sup>135</sup>

Just as frequently, however, food arrived in a camp only to be stolen immediately. Thieving took place at just about every level. Usually, food was stolen while it was being prepared, by those working in the kitchen or food storage facilities. For that reason, prisoners sought out jobs which gave them access to food—cooking, dishwashing, work in storage warehouses—in order to be able to steal. Evgeniya Ginzburg was once “saved” by a job washing dishes in the men’s dining hall. Not only was she able to eat “real meat broth and excellent dumplings fried in sunflower-seed oil,” but she also found that other prisoners stood in awe of her. Speaking to her, one man’s voice trembled, “from a mixture of acute envy and humble adoration of anyone who occupied such an exalted position in life—‘where the food is!’”<sup>136</sup>

Even jobs harvesting crops on camp farms or peeling potatoes were very desirable, and prisoners paid bribes to obtain them, simply to be in a position to steal food. Later in her camp career, Ginzburg also worked tending the chickens that would be eaten by the camp bosses. She and her co-worker took full advantage of the situation: “we smothered the camp semolina with cod-liver oil that we ‘borrowed’ from the chickens. We boiled up oatmeal jelly. We also had three eggs daily between us—one in the soup, and one each to be eaten raw as a special gastronomic treat. (We took no more because we dared not lower the egg productivity index, by which our work was judged.)”<sup>137</sup>

Theft also took place on a much grander scale, particularly in the camp towns of the far north, where food shortages among free workers and camp guards as well as prisoners made it worth everybody’s while to steal. Every camp filed reports every year of lost property. Those of the Kedrovyi Shor *lagpunkt* show losses of goods and money of more than 20,000 rubles for the fourth quarter of 1944 alone.<sup>138</sup>

On a national scale, the numbers went much higher. A prosecutors’ office report for 1947, for example, lists many cases of theft, among them one in Vyatlag, where twelve people, including the head of the camp warehouse, helped themselves to 170,000 rubles worth of food products and vegetables. Another report of that year calculated that in thirty-four camps investigated in the second quarter of 1946 alone, a total of 70,000 kilograms of bread had been stolen, along with 132,000 kilograms of potatoes and 17,000 kilograms of meat. The inspector writing the report concluded that “The complicated system of feeding prisoners creates the conditions for the easy theft of bread and other products.” He also blamed the “system of feeding free workers

with ration cards,” as well as the internal camp inspection teams, whose members were thoroughly corrupt too.<sup>139</sup>

In some cases the inspection system did make an impact: some camps, fearing trouble, made an effort to fulfill the letter if not the spirit of the law. One camp inmate, for example, received a half-glass of sugar at the end of each month, which he ate raw. This was how his camp’s boss ensured he received the amount stipulated by the Moscow bureaucracy. He and his fellow prisoners celebrated the occasion as “sugar day.”<sup>140</sup>

In the end, not everybody starved. For even if most food products disappeared before they made it into the soup, one staple food was usually available: bread. Like soup, the bread of the Gulag has been described many times. Sometimes it is remembered as badly baked: one prisoner remembered it being so hard it “resembled a brick,” and so small it could be eaten “in two bites.”<sup>141</sup> Another wrote that it was “literally ‘black’ bread because the bran left in it colored the bread black and made the texture coarse.” He also noted that it was baked with a great deal of water, so that it was “wet and weighed heavy, so that in actual fact we received less than our allotted 700 grams.”<sup>142</sup>

Others recalled that prisoners fought over the drier, less watery ends of the loaves.<sup>143</sup> In Varlam Shalamov’s short story “Cherry Brandy,” a fictive description of the death of Osip Mandelstam, the poet’s approaching death is signaled by his loss of interest in such matters: “He no longer watched for the heel of the loaf or cried when he didn’t get it. He didn’t stuff the bread into his mouth with trembling fingers.”<sup>144</sup>

In the hungrier camps, in the hungrier years, bread took on an almost sacred status, and a special etiquette grew up around its consumption. While camp thieves stole almost everything else with impunity, for example, the theft of bread was considered particularly heinous and unforgivable. Vladimir Petrov found on his long train journey to Kolyma that “thieving was permitted and could be applied to anything within the thief’s capacity and luck, but there was one exception—bread. Bread was sacred and inviolable, regardless of any distinctions in the population of the car.” Petrov had in fact been chosen as the *starosta* of the car, and in that capacity was charged with beating up a petty thief who had stolen bread. He duly did so.<sup>145</sup> Thomas Sgovio also wrote that the unwritten law of the camp criminals in Kolyma was: “Steal anything—excepting the holy bread portion.” He too had “seen more than one prisoner beaten to death for violating the sacred tradition.”<sup>146</sup> Similarly, Kazimierz Zarod remembered that

If a prisoner stole clothes, tobacco, or almost anything else and was discovered, he could expect a beating from his fellow prisoners, but the unwritten law of the camp—and I have heard from men from other camps that it was the same everywhere—was that a prisoner caught stealing another's bread earned a death sentence.<sup>147</sup>

In his memoirs, Dmitri Panin, a close friend of Solzhenitsyn's, described exactly how such a death sentence might be carried out: "An offender caught in the act of stealing bread would be tossed in the air by other prisoners and allowed to crash to the ground; this was repeated several times, damaging his kidneys. Then they would heave him out of the barracks like so much carrion."

Panin, like many other camp survivors who lived through the hungry war years, also wrote eloquently about the individual rituals with which some prisoners ate their bread. If prisoners received bread only once a day, in the morning, they faced an agonizing decision: eat it all at once, or save some until the afternoon. To save the bread risked loss or theft of the precious quarter-loaf. On the other hand, a piece of bread was something to look forward to during the day. Panin's caution against the latter approach must stand as a unique testimony to the science of avoiding hunger:

When you get your ration you have an overwhelming desire to stretch out the pleasure of eating it, cutting your bread up evenly into tiny pieces, rolling the crumbs into little balls. From sticks and strings you improvise a pair of scales and weigh every piece. In such ways you try to prolong the business of eating by three hours or more. But this is tantamount to suicide!

Never on any account take more than a half-hour to consume your ration. Every bite of bread should be chewed thoroughly, to enable the stomach to digest it as easily as possible so that it give up to one's organism a maximum amount of energy . . . if you always split your ration and put aside a part of it for the evening, you are finished. Eat it all at one sitting; if, on the other hand, you gobble it down too quickly, as famished people often do in normal circumstances, you will also shorten your days . . .<sup>148</sup>

*Zek*s were not the only inhabitants of the Soviet Union who became obsessed with bread and the many ways to eat it, however. To this day, a Russian acquaintance of mine will not eat brown bread of any kind,

because, as a child during the war in Kazakhstan, he ate nothing else. And Susanna Pechora, a prisoner in Minlag in the 1950s, once overheard a conversation about camp bread between two Russian peasant women, also prisoners—women who had known what life was like *without* camp bread:

One of them was holding a piece of bread and stroking it. "Oh my *khlē-bushka*" [a nickname, "little bread," such as one might give to a child], she said, gratefully, "they give you to us every day." The other said, "We could dry it, and send it to the children, they are hungry after all. But I don't think they'd allow us to send it . . ."<sup>149</sup>

After that, Pechora told me, she thought twice before complaining about the lack of food in the camps.

## Chapter 11

## WORK IN THE CAMPS



*Those who are sick, no good,  
 Too weak for mining  
 Are lowered down, sent  
 To the camp below  
 To fell the trees of Kolyma.  
 It's very simple when  
 Written down on paper. But I cannot forget  
 The chain of sleds upon the snow  
 And people, harnessed.  
 Straining their sunken chests, they pull the carts.  
 They either stop to rest  
 Or falter on steep slopes . . .  
 The heavy weight rolls down  
 And any moment  
 It will trip them . . .*

*Who has not seen a horse that stumbles?  
 But we, we have seen people in a harness . . .*

—Elena Vladimirova, "Kolyma"<sup>1</sup>

## RABOCHAYA ZONA: THE WORK ZONE

Work was the central function of most Soviet camps. It was the main occupation of prisoners, and the main preoccupation of the administration. Daily life was organized around work, and the prisoners' well-being depended upon how successfully they worked. Nevertheless, it is difficult to generalize about what camp work was like: the image of the prisoner in the snowstorm, digging gold or coal with a pickax, is only a stereotype. There were many such prisoners—millions, as the figures for the camps of Kolyma and Vorkuta make clear—but there were also, we now know, camps in central Moscow where prisoners designed airplanes, camps in central Russia where prisoners built and ran nuclear power plants, fishing camps on the Pacific coast, collective farm camps in southern Uzbekistan. The archives of the Gulag in Moscow are chock-full of photographs of prisoners with their camels.<sup>2</sup>

Without a doubt, the range of economic activity within the Gulag was as wide as the range of economic activity within the USSR itself. A glance through the *Guide to the System of Corrective-Labor Camps in the USSR*, the most comprehensive listing of camps to date, reveals the existence of camps organized around gold mines, coal mines, nickel mines; highway and railway construction; arms factories, chemical factories, metal-processing plants, electricity plants; the building of airports, apartment blocks, sewage systems; the digging of peat, the cutting of trees, and the canning of fish.<sup>3</sup> The Gulag administrators themselves preserved a photo album solely dedicated to the goods that inmates produced. Among other things, there are pictures of mines, missiles, and other army equipment; car parts, door locks, buttons; logs floating down rivers; wooden furniture, including chairs, cabinets, telephone boxes, and barrels; shoes, baskets, and textiles (with samples attached); rugs, leather, fur hats, sheepskin coats; glass cups, lamps, and jars; soap and candles; even toys—wooden tanks, tiny windmills, and mechanical rabbits playing drums.<sup>4</sup>

Work varied within individual camps as well as between them. True, many prisoners in forestry camps did nothing but fell trees. Prisoners with sentences of three years or less worked in "corrective-labor colonies," light-regime camps which were usually organized around a single factory or occupation. Larger Gulag camps, by contrast, might contain a number of industries: mines, a brick factory, and a power plant, as well as housing or

road construction sites. In such camps, prisoners unloaded the daily goods trains, drove trucks, picked vegetables, worked in kitchens, hospitals, and children's nurseries. Unofficially, prisoners also worked as servants, nannies, and tailors for the camp commanders, guards, and their wives.

Prisoners with long sentences often held down a wide variety of jobs, changing work frequently as their luck rose and fell. In her nearly two-decade camp career, Evgeniya Ginzburg worked cutting trees, digging ditches, cleaning the camp guest house, washing dishes, tending chickens, doing laundry for camp commanders' wives, and caring for prisoners' children. Finally, she became a nurse.<sup>5</sup> During the eleven years he spent in camps, another political prisoner, Leonid Sitko, worked as a welder, as a stonemason in a quarry, as a construction worker on a building brigade, as a porter in a railway depot, as a miner in a coal mine, and as a carpenter in a furniture factory, making tables and bookshelves.<sup>6</sup>

But although jobs could be as varied within the camp system as they were in the outside world, working prisoners usually broke down into two categories: those assigned to *obshchya raboty*—"general work"—and the *pridurki*, a word usually translated into English as "trusties." The latter had, as we shall see, the status of a separate caste. General work, the lot of the vast majority of prisoners, was precisely what it sounds like: unskilled, physically demanding hard labor. "The first camp winter of 1949–50 was especially difficult for me," wrote Isaak Filshtinsky. "I didn't have a profession which could be put to use in the camps, and I was forced to go from place to place, doing various kinds of general work, to saw, to carry, to pull, to push, and so on—to go, in other words, wherever it came into the head of the work-assigner to send me."<sup>7</sup>

With the exception of those who had been lucky in the very first round of work assignments—usually those who were building engineers or members of other useful camp professions, or else had already established themselves as informers—the majority of *zeks* were assigned to general work as a matter of course after their week or so in quarantine had ended. They were also assigned to a brigade: a group of anywhere from four to 400 *zeks*, who not only worked together, but also ate together and generally slept in the same barracks. Each brigade was led by a brigadier, a trusted, high-status prisoner who was responsible for doling out jobs, overseeing the work—and ensuring that the team met the production norm.

The importance of the brigadier, whose status lay somewhere between



Grave Digging: a drawing by Benjamin Mkrtychyan, Ivdel, 1953

that of prisoner and that of administrator, was not lost on camp authorities. In 1933, the boss of Dmitlag sent an order to all of his subordinates, reminding them of the need to "find among our shock-workers the capable people who are so necessary to our work," since "the brigadier is the most important, most significant person on the construction site."<sup>8</sup>

From the individual prisoner's point of view, his relationship with the brigadier was more than merely important: it could determine his quality of life—even whether he lived or died, as one prisoner wrote:

The life of a person depends very much on his brigade and his brigadier, given that you spend all your days and nights in their company. At work, in the dining hall, and in your bunks—always the same faces. The brigade members can either work all together, in groups, or individually. They can help you survive, or help destroy you. Either sympathy and help, or hostility and indifference. The role of the brigadier is no less important. It also matters who he is, what he thinks his tasks and obligations are: to serve the bosses at your cost and his own benefit, to treat his brigade members like underlings, servants and lackeys—or to be your comrade in ill-fortune and

to do everything possible to make life easier for the members of the brigade.<sup>9</sup>

Some brigadiers did indeed threaten and intimidate their workforce. On his first day in the Karaganda mines, Alexander Weissberg fainted from hunger and exhaustion: "with the roars of a maddened bull the brigadier now turned on me, flinging every ounce of his powerful body on to me, kicking and punching and finally dealing me such a blow on the head that I fell to the ground, half-stunned, covered in bruises and with blood streaming down my face. . ."<sup>10</sup>

In other cases, the brigadier allowed the brigade itself to function as an organized peer group, putting pressure on prisoners to work harder even if they were otherwise inclined. In the novel *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, Solzhenitsyn's hero at one point muses that a camp brigade "isn't like a work gang outside, where Ivan Ivanovich and Pyotr Petrovich each get a wage of his own. In the camps things are arranged so that the *zek* is kept up to the mark not by his bosses but by the others in his gang. Either everybody gets a bonus or else they all die together."<sup>11</sup>

Vernon Kress, another Kolyma prisoner, was beaten and shouted at by his brigade comrades for being unable to keep up, and was ultimately forced into a "weak" brigade, none of whose members ever received the full ration.<sup>12</sup> Yuri Zorin also had the experience of being part of a genuinely hard-working brigade, composed mostly of Lithuanians who would not tolerate shirkers in their ranks: "You can't imagine how willingly and well they worked . . . if they thought you worked badly, you got kicked out of the Lithuanian brigade."<sup>13</sup>

If you had the bad luck to end up in a "bad" brigade, and you could not bribe or squirm your way out, you could starve. M. B. Mindlin, later one of the founders of the Memorial Society, was once assigned to a Kolyma brigade composed mostly of Georgians and led by a Georgian brigadier. He quickly realized not only that the brigade members were as afraid of their brigadier as they were of the camp guards, but also that as the "only Jew in a brigade of Georgians," he would be shown no special favors. One day he worked particularly hard, in an attempt to be awarded the highest level of rations, 1,200 grams of bread. The brigadier refused to recognize this, however, and marked him down as deserving only 700 grams. With the aid of a bribe, Mindlin switched brigades, and found a completely different atmo-

sphere: the new brigadier actually cared about his underlings, and even allowed him a few days of lighter work in the beginning, in order to get his strength back: "Everyone who got into his brigade considered himself lucky, and was saved from death." Later, he himself became a brigadier, and took it upon himself to dole out bribes, in order to ensure that all the members of his brigade got the best possible deal from the camp cooks, breadcutters, and other important people.<sup>14</sup>

The brigadier's attitude mattered because, for the most part, general work was not intended to be phoney or meaningless. Whereas in German camps, work was often designed, according to one prominent scholar, to be "principally a means of torture and abuse," Soviet prisoners were meant to be fulfilling some aspect of the camp's production plan.<sup>15</sup> True, there were exceptions to this rule. At times, stupid or sadistic guards would actually set prisoners pointless tasks. Susanna Pechora recalled being assigned to carry buckets of clay back and forth, "totally pointless work." One of the "bosses" in charge of her work site specifically told her, "I don't need your work, I need your suffering," a phrase which would have been familiar to the prisoners of Solovetsky in the 1920s.<sup>16</sup> By the 1940s, as we shall see, there also arose a system of punishment camps, whose purpose was not primarily economic but punitive. Even within them, however, prisoners were expected to produce something.

Most of the time, prisoners were not meant to suffer—or perhaps it is more accurate to say that no one cared if they did or not. Far more important was that they fit into a camp production plan and fulfill a work norm. A norm could be anything: a certain number of cubic meters of wood to be cut down, of ditches to be dug, of coal to be hauled. And these norms were taken deadly seriously. Camps were covered with posters exhorting prisoners to fulfill their norms. The entire "cultural-educational" apparatus of the camps was devoted to the same message. The dining halls or central square of some camps featured enormous chalkboards, listing each brigade and its latest norm-fulfillment.<sup>17</sup>

Norms were calculated with great care and scientific reasoning by the norm-setter (*normirovshik*), whose job was thought to require great skill. Jacques Rossi records, for example, that those shoveling snow were assigned different norms depending upon whether the snow was freshly fallen snow, light snow, lightly packed snow, packed snow (requiring pressure from the foot on the shovel), heavily packed snow, or frozen snow (requiring work

with picks). Even after all of that, "a series of coefficients account for the distance and height of the shoveled snow, and so forth."<sup>18</sup>

But although theoretically scientific, the process of establishing norms for work, and of determining who had achieved them, was fraught with corruption, irregularity, and incongruity. To begin with, prisoners were usually assigned norms that corresponded with those assigned to free workers: they were meant to achieve the same as professional foresters or miners. By and large, however, prisoners were not professional foresters or miners, and often had little idea what they were meant to be doing. Nor, after long terms in jail and harrowing journeys in unheated cattle cars, were they even in average physical condition.

The more inexperienced and exhausted the prisoner, the more he would suffer. Evgeniya Ginzburg wrote a classic description of two women, both intellectuals unaccustomed to hard labor, both weakened by years in prison, trying to cut down trees:

For three days, Galya and I struggled to achieve the impossible. Poor trees, how they must have suffered at being mangled by our inexperienced hands. Half-dead ourselves, and completely unskilled, we were in no condition to tackle them. The axe would slip and send showers of chips in our faces. We sawed feverishly, jerkily, mentally accusing each other of clumsiness—we knew we could not afford the luxury of a quarrel. Time and again the saw got stuck. But the most terrifying moment was when the tree was at last on the point of falling, only we didn't know which way. Once Galya got hit on the head, but the medical orderly refused even to put iodine on the cut, saying, "Aha! That's an old trick! Trying to get exempted on the first day, are you?"

At the end of the day, the brigadier declared Evgeniya and Galya had achieved 18 percent of the norm, and "paid" them for their poor showing: "Receiving the scrap of bread which corresponded to our performance, we were led out next day literally staggering from weakness to our place of work." Meanwhile, the brigadier kept repeating that he "did not intend to throw away precious food on traitors who could not fulfill their norm."<sup>19</sup>

In the camps of the far north—particularly the camps of the Kolyma region, as well as Vorkuta and Norilsk, all of which lie beyond the Arctic Circle—the climate and the terrain exacerbated the difficulties. Summer, contrary to popular belief, was often no more bearable in these Arctic re-

gions than winter. Even there, temperatures can rise well above 85 degrees Fahrenheit. When the snow melts, the surface of the tundra turns to mud, making walking difficult, and mosquitoes appear to travel in gray clouds, making so much noise it is impossible to hear anything else. One prisoner remembered them:

The mosquitoes crawled up our sleeves, under our trousers. One's face would blow up from the bites. At the work site, we were brought lunch, and it happened that as you were eating your soup, the mosquitoes would fill up the bowl like buckwheat porridge. They filled up your eyes, your nose and throat, and the taste of them was sweet, like blood. The more you moved and waved them away, the more they attacked. The best method was to ignore them, to dress lighter and instead of an anti-mosquito hat, to wear a wreath of grass or birch bark.<sup>20</sup>

Winters, of course, were very, very cold. Temperatures could fall to 30, 40, or 50 degrees below zero. Memoirists, poets, and novelists have all struggled to describe what it felt like to work in such frost. One wrote of it being so cold that "the simplest sudden motion of a hand in the air caused a notable swishing sound."<sup>21</sup> Another wrote that one Christmas Eve morning, he awoke to discover that he could not move his head.

My first waking thought was that it had somehow been tied to the planks of my bunk during the night, but as I tried to sit up, the piece of material I had tied around my head and over my ears before I went to sleep the night before had pulled away. Pulling myself up on one elbow, I tugged at the material and realized that it was frozen to the wooden plank. My breath and the breath of all the men in the hut hung in the air like smoke.<sup>22</sup>

Yet another wrote that "It was dangerous to stop moving. During head count we jumped, ran in place, and slapped our bodies to keep warm. I perpetually kneaded my toes and curled my fingers into a fist . . . touching a metal tool with a bare hand could tear off the skin, and going to the bathroom was extremely dangerous. A bout of diarrhea could land you in the snow forever." As a result, some prisoners simply soiled their trousers: "Working next to them was unpleasant, and back in the tent, when we began to warm up, the stench was unbearable. Those who had soiled themselves were often beaten and thrown out."<sup>23</sup>

Certain general-work jobs, from the point of view of the weather, were worse than others. In the coal mines of the Arctic, one inmate remembered, the underground air was warmer, but freezing water was constantly dripping on the miners: "The miner becomes a sort of giant icicle, his organism begins to freeze for a long and stable period of time. After three or four months of such hellish work, prisoners begin to experience massive illnesses . . ."24

Isaak Filshtinsky also wound up assigned to one of the most unpleasant winter jobs in Kargopollog, sorting logs on their way to be processed. It meant standing in water all day, and although the water was warm—it was pumped from the electrical plant—the air was not:

Because in that winter the Arkhangelsk region maintained a stable frost of forty, forty-five degrees below zero, a thick fog hung at all times over the sorting basin. It was at the same time very wet, and very cold . . . the work was not very difficult, but after thirty to forty minutes your entire body was permeated and enveloped by damp, your chin, lips, and eyelashes were covered in frost, and the frost had penetrated to your very bones, through the pathetic camp clothing.<sup>25</sup>

The worst winter jobs were in the forests. For not only was the taiga cold in winter, but it was also periodically swept by severe, unpredictable winter storms—called *burany* or *purgai*. Dmitri Bystroletov, a prisoner in Sibltag, was caught in one:

In that instant, the wind began a wild and terrifying howl, forcing us down to the ground. The snow swirled up into the air, and everything disappeared—the lights of the camp, the stars, the aurora borealis—and we were left alone in a white fog. Opening our arms wide, clumsily slipping and stumbling, falling and supporting one another, we tried as quickly as possible to find the road back. Suddenly, a thunderclap burst above our heads. I scarcely managed to hang on to my fellow climber, when a violent stream of ice, snow, and rocks began gushing toward our faces. The swirling snow made it impossible to breathe, impossible to see . . .<sup>26</sup>

Janusz Bardach was caught in a *buran* in Kolyma as well, while working in a quarry. Along with their guards, he and his fellow prisoners made their way back to camp following the watchdogs, attached to one another by rope:

I couldn't see anything beyond Yuri's back and clung to the rope as though it were a life preserver . . . With the familiar landmarks gone, I had no idea how much further we had to go and was sure we'd never make it back. My foot fell upon something soft—a prisoner who had let go of the rope. "Stop!" I shouted. But there was no stopping. No one could hear my voice. I leaned down and pulled his arm towards the rope. "Here!" I tried to link his hand with the rope. "Hold on!" It was no use. The man's arm fell to the ground when I let go. Yuri's stern command to move on carried me forward . . .

When Bardach's brigade returned to the camp, three prisoners were missing. Usually, "the bodies of prisoners who got lost weren't found until springtime, often within one hundred meters of the zone."<sup>27</sup>

The regulation clothing allotted to prisoners gave them little protection from the weather. In 1943, for example, the central Gulag administration ordered that prisoners were to receive, among other things, one summer shirt (to last two seasons), a pair of summer trousers (to last two seasons), one padded-cotton winter jacket (to last two years), padded winter trousers (to last eighteen months), felt boots (to last two years), and underwear, intended for nine months.<sup>28</sup> In practice, there were never enough even of these paltry items. An inspection of twenty-three camps in 1948 reported that the supply of "clothes, underclothes, and shoes is unsatisfactory." That appears to have been an understatement. In a camp at Krasnoyarsk, less than half of the prisoners had shoes. In Norilsk, in the far north, only 75 percent had warm boots, and only 86 percent had warm clothes. In Vorkuta, also in the far north, only 25 to 30 percent of prisoners had underclothes, while only 48 percent had warm boots.<sup>29</sup>

In the absence of shoes, prisoners improvised. They made boots out of birch bark, scraps of fabric, old rubber tires. At best, these contraptions were clumsy and difficult to walk in, particularly in deep snow. At worst, they leaked, virtually guaranteeing frostbite.<sup>30</sup> Elinor Lipper described her homemade boots, which in her camp were nicknamed "Che-Te-Ze," the abbreviation for the Chelyabinsk Tire Factory:

They were made of lightly padded and quilted sacking with high, wide tops that reach to the knee, the shoe itself being strengthened by oil cloth or artificial leather at the toe and heel. The sole is made of three cross sections of rubber from worn-out automobile tires. The whole thing is fastened to



the foot with string and tied with string below the knee so that the snow does not get in . . . after a day's use they become all twisted, and the flabby soles turn every which way. They absorb moisture with incredible speed, especially when the sacks of which they are made were used for bagging salt . . .<sup>31</sup>

Another prisoner describes a similar improvisation: "The sides were open so that the toes were exposed from the sides. The cloth to wrap up the feet could not be secured tightly, meaning that toes were thereby exposed to frost." As a result of wearing these shoes, he did indeed get frostbite—which, he reckoned, saved his life, as he was no longer able to work.<sup>32</sup>

Different prisoners had different theories about how to cope with the cold. To recover from the frost at the end of the day, for example, some prisoners would rush into the barracks after work and crowd around the stove, so close that their clothes would sometimes burst into flames: "The repulsive smell of burning rags would come up and bite into your nostrils."<sup>33</sup> Others thought this unwise. Isaak Filshinskii was told by more experienced inmates that crowding around the stove or the camp fire was dangerous, as the sudden change of temperature brought on pneumonia: "The human organism is so constructed so that no matter how cold it is, the body adjusts and gets used to it. I always followed this sage rule in camp and I never caught cold."<sup>34</sup>

Camp authorities were supposed to make some concessions to the cold. According to the rules, prisoners in certain northern camps received extra rations. But these, according to documents of 1944, could amount to as little as 50 extra grams of bread a day—a few bites—which was hardly enough to compensate for extreme cold.<sup>35</sup> Theoretically, when it was too cold, or when a storm was pending, prisoners were not meant to work at all. Vladimir Petrov claimed that during the Berzin regime in Kolyma, prisoners had stopped working when temperatures reached 60 degrees Fahrenheit below zero. In the winter of 1938–39, after Berzin had been deposed, temperatures had to fall to 60 degrees below zero before work stopped. Even this rule was not always adhered to, writes Petrov, since the only person at the gold field who had a thermometer was the camp commander. As a result, "only three days during the winter of 1938–39 were declared non-working days because of low temperatures, as against fifteen days during the winter of 1937–38."<sup>36</sup>

Another memoirist, Kazimierz Zarod, recorded that the cutoff temper-

ature in his camp during the Second World War was 49 degrees below zero, and recalled one occasion when his logging brigade was told to return to camp during the day, because the thermometer had reached minus 53: "How briskly we collected our equipment, formed ourselves into a column and began our journey back to camp."<sup>37</sup> Bardach recalls that in Kolyma in the war years, the rule was minus 50 degrees, "although the wind chill was never taken into account."<sup>38</sup>

But weather was not the only obstacle to norm-fulfillment. In many camps, norms really were set impossibly high. In part this was a side effect of the logic of Soviet central planning, which decreed that enterprises had to increase their output every year. Elinor Olitskaya remembered her fellow inmates struggling to fulfill the norms in a camp sewing factory, wanting to keep their warm, indoor jobs. But because they did fulfill them, the camp administration kept raising them, as a result of which they became unattainable.<sup>39</sup>

Norms also grew tougher because prisoners and norm-setters alike lied, overestimating how much work had been and would be done. As a result, norms sometimes became astronomical over time. Alexander Weissberg recalled that even for the supposedly easier jobs, the norms seemed incredible: "Everyone seemed to be faced with a virtually impossible task. The two men in charge of the laundry had to wash the clothes of 800 men in ten days."<sup>40</sup>

Not that overfulfilling the norm necessarily brought the expected advantages. Antoni Ekart recalled an incident when ice on the river near his camp broke, and a flood threatened: "Several brigades of the strongest prisoners, including all the 'shock' men, worked like mad for two days, practically without a break. For what they had done they received one herring for every two men and a packet of *makhorka* [rough tobacco] for every four."<sup>41</sup>

In such conditions—with long working days, few days off, and little rest during the day—accidents were frequent. In the early 1950s, a group of inexperienced women prisoners were ordered to put out a brushfire near Ozerlag. On that occasion alone, recalled one of them, "several people burned to death."<sup>42</sup> Exhaustion and the weather often proved a lethal combination, as Alexander Dolgun testifies:

Cold, numbed fingers could not hold on to handles and levers and timbers and crates, and there were many accidents, often fatal. One man was crushed when we were rolling logs off a flat car, using two logs as a ramp. He was buried when twenty or more logs let loose at once and he was not

fast enough. The guards shoved his body out of the way on the platform and the blood-stiffened mass was waiting for us to carry it home when night came.<sup>43</sup>

Moscow kept statistics on accidents, and these occasionally provoked irate exchanges between inspectors and camp commanders. One such compilation, for the year 1945, lists 7,124 accidents in the Vorkuta coal mines alone, including 482 that resulted in serious injury and 137 that resulted in death. The inspectors laid the blame on the shortage of miners' lamps, on electrical failures, and on the inexperience of workers and their frequent rotation. Angrily, the inspectors calculated the number of workdays lost due to accidents: 61,492.<sup>44</sup>

Absurdly bad organization and slovenly management also hampered work. Although it is important to note that ordinary Soviet workplaces were badly run too, the situation was worse within the Gulag, where the lives and health of workers was not held to be important, and where the regular arrival of spare parts was disrupted by weather and huge distances. Chaos had been the reigning spirit of the Gulag since the days of the White Sea Canal, and it continued into the 1950s, even after far more workplaces in the Soviet Union were mechanized. For those doing forestry work, "there were no chainsaws, no timber-haulage tractors, and no mechanical loaders."<sup>45</sup> Those working in textile factories were given "working tools either too few or else inappropriate." This meant, according to one prisoner, that "all the seams had to be pressed with a huge iron weighing two kilograms. One had to iron 426 pairs of trousers during one session, one's hands got numb with lifting the weight and one's legs swollen and painful."<sup>46</sup>

Machinery also broke down constantly, a factor not necessarily taken into account when norms were calculated. In the same textile factory, "mechanics were constantly being summoned. These were mostly female convicts. The repairs went on for hours, for the women were not skilled. It became impossible to do the compulsory amount of work, and consequently we received no bread."<sup>47</sup>

The theme of broken machinery and unskilled machine technicians comes up in the annals of the Gulag administration again and again. Regional camp administrators attending the Far Eastern Party Conference in Khabarovsk in 1934 complained that constant breakdowns in equipment supply and the poor qualifications of technicians meant they could not meet norms for gold production.<sup>48</sup> A 1938 letter addressed to the Deputy

Minister of Internal Affairs in charge of the Gulag states that "40 to 50 percent of tractors are broken." But even more primitive working methods often failed to work too. A letter of a year earlier notes that of the 36,491 horses employed by the Gulag, 25 percent were not fit to work.<sup>49</sup>

The Gulag's enterprises also felt very keenly the lack of engineers and administrators. Few skilled technicians voluntarily worked on Gulag projects, and those who did volunteer did not necessarily have the appropriate skills. Over the years, many efforts were made to attract free workers to the camps, and enormous incentives were offered. As early as the mid-1930s, recruiters from Dalstroi were agitating across the country, offering special privileges for anyone who signed a two-year labor contract. These included a wage 20 percent higher than the Soviet average for the first two years, and 10 percent higher for the following years, as well as paid vacations, access to special food products and supplies, and a generous pension.<sup>50</sup>

The camps of the far north were also portrayed with great fanfare and enthusiasm in the Soviet press. An example of this sort of propaganda appeared in English in a publication called *Sovietland*, written for the benefit of foreigners. In an April 1939 article devoted to Magadan, a classic of the genre, the magazine gushed about the city's magical appeal:

The sea of lights that is Magadan by night is a most stirring and alluring spectacle. This is a town which is alive and bustling every minute of the day and night. It swarms with people whose lives are regulated by a strict working schedule. Accuracy and promptness begets speed, and speed becomes easy and happy work . . .<sup>51</sup>

No mention is made of the fact that most of the people whose lives were "regulated by a strict working schedule" were prisoners.

Not that it mattered: these efforts failed to attract the necessary caliber of specialists anyway, leaving the Gulag to rely upon prisoners who found themselves there by accident. One prisoner recalled having been sent, with a building brigade, 600 kilometers north of Magadan to build a bridge. Once they arrived, they realized that no one in the brigade had ever built a bridge before. One of the prisoners, an engineer, was put in charge of the project, although bridges were not his specialty. The bridge was built. It was also washed away in the first flood.<sup>52</sup>

This was a minor disaster, however, in comparison to some others. There were entire Gulag projects, employing thousands of people and enor-

mous resources, which proved spectacularly wasteful and ill-conceived. Of these, perhaps the most famous was the attempted construction of a railway line from the Vorkuta region to the mouth of the Ob River on the Arctic Sea. The decision to start building was taken by the Soviet government in April 1947. A month later, exploration, surveying work, and construction all began simultaneously. Prisoners also began building a new seaport at the Kamenny cape, where the Ob River widens out toward the sea.

As usual, there were complications: there were not enough tractors, so prisoners used old tanks instead. The planners made up for their lack of machines by overworking the prisoners. Eleven-hour days were normal, and even free workers sometimes stayed on the job from nine o'clock in the morning until midnight during the long summer days. By the end of the year, the complications had grown more serious. The surveying team had established that the Kamenny cape was a poor location for the port: the water was not deep enough for large ships and the land was too unstable for heavy industry. In January 1949, Stalin held a midnight meeting, where the Soviet leadership determined to move the site, and the railway too: the line would now connect the Ob not with the Vorkuta region to the west, but with the Yenisei River to the east. Two new camps were built—Construction Site No. 501 and Construction Site No. 503. Each began to lay down railway track at the same time. The idea was to meet in the middle. The distance between them was 806 miles.

Work continued. At its height there were, according to one source, 80,000 people working on this railway, according to another, 120,000. The project became known as the "Road of Death." Construction proved nearly impossible in the Arctic tundra. As winter permafrost turned quickly into summer mud, track had to be constantly prevented from bending or sinking. Even so, wagons frequently came off the rails. Because of supply problems, the prisoners began using wood instead of steel in the railway construction, a decision which guaranteed the project's failure. At the time of Stalin's death in 1953, 310 miles had been built from one end of the railway, 124 miles from the other end. The port existed only on paper. Within weeks of Stalin's funeral, the entire project, which had cost 40 billion rubles and tens of thousands of lives, was abandoned for good.<sup>53</sup>

On a smaller scale, such stories were repeated every day, all across the Gulag. Yet despite weather, inexperience, and mismanagement, pressure on camp administrators never slackened, nor did pressure on prisoners. The bosses were subject to endless inspections and verification programs, and

constantly harangued to do better. However fictitious, the results mattered. Ludicrous though it may have seemed to prisoners, who knew perfectly well how shoddily work was being done, this was, in fact, a deadly serious game. Many of them would not survive it.

#### KVCh: THE CULTURAL-EDUCATIONAL DEPARTMENT

Were they not clearly marked as belonging to the NKVD archives, the casual observer could be forgiven for thinking that the photographs of Bogoslovlag, which appear in a carefully preserved album, dated 1945, were not of a camp at all. The pictures show carefully planted gardens, flowers, shrubs, a fountain, and a gazebo in which prisoners could sit and rest. The entrance to the camp is marked by a red star, and a slogan: "All of our strength for the future power of the Motherland!" The photographs of prisoners gracing another album, filed nearby, are equally hard to reconcile with the popular image of the Gulag inmate. There is a happy man holding a pumpkin; cows pulling a plow; a smiling camp commander picking an apple. Beside the pictures are graphs. One shows the camp's planned production, the other the plan's fulfillment.<sup>54</sup>

All of these albums, neatly cut, pasted, and labeled with the same conscientiousness that schoolchildren show when putting together a class project, were produced by the same institution: the Gulag's *Kulturno-Vospitatelnaya Chast*, the Cultural-Educational Department, or KVCh, as it was usually known to prisoners. The KVCh, or its equivalent, had been in existence since the Gulag began. In 1924, the very first edition of *SLON*, the journal of the Solovetsky prison, contained an article on the future of prisons in Russia: "The corrective-labor policy of Russia must re-educate prisoners through accustoming them to participating in organized productive labor."<sup>55</sup>

Most of the time, however, the real goal of camp propaganda was higher production figures. This was even the case during the building of the White Sea Canal, when, as we have seen, the "re-education" propaganda was at its loudest and perhaps most sincere. At that time, the national cult of the shock-worker was at its height. Camp artists painted portraits of the canal's best workers, and camp actors and musicians put on special concerts for them. The shock-workers were even invited to huge assemblies, at which songs were sung and speeches were read out. One such assembly, held on

April 21, 1933, was followed by a two-day "work storm": for forty-eight hours, none of the 30,000 shock-workers left their workplaces at all.<sup>56</sup>

This sort of activity was unceremoniously abandoned in the late 1930s when prisoners became "enemies" and could no longer be "shock-workers" at the same time—nevertheless, after Beria took control of the camps in 1939, propaganda did slowly return. While there would never again be a White Sea Canal—a Gulag project whose "success" was trumpeted to the world—the language of re-education was brought back to the camps. By the 1940s, every camp theoretically had at least one KVCh instructor, as well as a small library and a KVCh "club," where theatrical performances and concerts were put on, political lectures were given, and political discussions were held. Thomas Sgovio remembered one such club: "The main room, seating about thirty persons, had wooden, gaudily painted walls. There were a few tables, supposedly for reading purposes. However, there were no books, newspapers or periodicals. How could there be? Newspapers were worth their weight in gold. We used them for smoking."<sup>57</sup>

From the 1930s on, the main "clients" of the KVCh were supposed to be the criminal prisoners. Just as it was unclear whether politicals would be allowed to hold specialists' jobs, so too was it unclear whether it was worth anybody's time trying to re-educate them. A 1940 NKVD directive on the cultural-educational work of the camps stated explicitly that those who had committed counter-revolutionary crimes were not suitable targets for re-education. In camp theatrical productions, they were allowed to play musical instruments, but not to speak or sing.<sup>58</sup>

As was so often the case, these orders were ignored more frequently than they were obeyed. And—as was also often the case—the KVCh's actual function in camp life differed from what the Gulag's masters in Moscow had intended it to do. If Moscow intended the KVCh to force prisoners to work harder, the prisoners used the KVCh for their own purposes: for moral support—and for survival.

On the face of it, it appears as if the cultural-educational instructors inside the camps sought to propagate the value of work among prisoners much in the same way that Communist Party operatives sought to do so in the world outside the prison gates. In the larger camps, the KVCh produced camp newspapers. Sometimes these were full newspapers, with reports and long articles on the successes of the camp, as well as "self-criticism"—comments about what was going wrong inside the camp—a standard feature of all the Soviet press. Aside from a brief period in the early 1930s, these

newspapers were intended largely for the free workers and the camp administration.<sup>59</sup>

For prisoners, there were also "wall newspapers," designed not for distribution (there were paper shortages, after all) but for display on special notice boards. One prisoner described the wall newspapers as "an attribute of the Soviet way of life, no one ever read them but they appeared regularly." They often featured "humor sections": "They assumed, obviously, that workers dying of hunger would read the material in this section, give a great belly laugh, and finally hold up to shame those refusers and shirkers who didn't want to repay their guilt to the Motherland through honest work."<sup>60</sup>

Ludicrous though they seemed to many, the central Gulag administration in Moscow took the wall newspapers very seriously. Wall newspapers, ordered one directive, should "portray the best examples of work, popularize the shock-workers, condemn the shirkers." No pictures of Stalin were allowed: these were, after all, still criminals, not "comrades," and they were still excommunicated from Soviet life, forbidden even to gaze upon their leader. The often absurd atmosphere of secrecy which had descended upon the camps in 1937 remained in place throughout the 1940s as well: newspapers printed in the camps could not be taken out of the camps.<sup>61</sup>

Along with hanging up newspapers, the KVCh also showed films. Gustav Herling was shown an American musical, "full of women in fitted bodices, men in tight jackets and frilly cravats," as well as a propaganda film which ended in "the triumph of righteousness": "The clumsy students came first in their socialist competition of work and with blazing eyes delivered a speech glorifying the State where manual labor had been raised to the highest position of honor."<sup>62</sup>

Meanwhile, some criminal prisoners took advantage of the darkened rooms where the films were shown to carry out revenge killings and murders. "I remember, at the end of one of these performances, seeing the body of a dead man carried past on a stretcher," one prisoner told me.<sup>63</sup>

The KVCh also sponsored football matches, chess matches, concerts, and performances referred to solemnly as "self-taught creative activities." One archival document lists the following repertoire of an NKVD singing and dancing ensemble, which was touring the camps:

1. The Ballad of Stalin
2. The Cossack Meditation on Stalin

3. The Song of Beria
4. The Song of the Motherland
5. The Fight for the Motherland
6. Everything for the Motherland
7. The Song of the NKVD Warriors
8. The Song of the Chekists
9. The Song of the Distant Frontier Post
10. The March of the Border Guards<sup>64</sup>

There were also some lighter numbers such as "Let's Smoke" and "Song of the Dnieper," the latter celebrating a river at least, and not a secret police institution. The theatrical repertoire included some Chekhov plays as well. Nevertheless, the bulk of the artistic efforts were meant, at least in theory, for the prisoners' enlightenment, not their entertainment. As one 1940 order from Moscow declared, "Every performance must educate the prisoners, teaching them greater consciousness of labor."<sup>65</sup> As we shall see, the prisoners learned to use the performances to help them survive, as well.

But "self-taught creative activity" was not the Cultural-Educational Department's only concern—nor was it the only path to a lighter workload. The KVCh was also responsible for collecting suggestions as to how to improve or "rationalize" the prisoners' work, a task which it took grimly seriously. In its semi-annual report to Moscow, one camp in Nizhne-Amursk claimed, without irony, to have achieved 302 rationalizations, of which 157 were put into practice, thereby saving 812,332 rubles.<sup>66</sup>

Isaak Filshtinskii also notes, with a great deal of irony, that some prisoners became adept at twisting this policy to their own advantage. One, a former chauffeur, claimed that he knew how to construct a mechanism that would allow cars to run on oxygen. Excited by the prospect of discovering a really important "rationalization," the camp bosses gave him a laboratory in which to work on the idea: "I can't say whether they believed him or not. They were simply fulfilling instructions of the Gulag. In every camp, there should be people working as rationalizers and inventors... and who knows, maybe Vdovin would find something, and then they would all get the Stalin prize!" Vdovin's bluff was called, finally, when he returned one day from his lab with a giant construction made of scrap metal, the purpose of which he was incapable of explaining.<sup>67</sup>

As in the outside world, the camps also continued to hold "socialist competitions," work contests in which prisoners were meant to compete against

one another, the better to raise output. They also honored the camp shockworkers, for their alleged ability to triple and quadruple the norms. I've described the first such campaigns in Chapter 4, which began in the 1930s, but they continued—with markedly less enthusiasm and markedly more absurd hyperbole—into the 1940s. Prisoners who participated could win many different sorts of awards. Some received bigger rations or better living conditions. Others received more intangible prizes. In 1942, for example, a reward for good performance could include a *knizhka otlichnika*, a booklet awarded to those who attained the status of "excellent" workers. This contained a little calendar, with space for putting in daily percentages of norms fulfilled; a blank space for writing in suggestions for "rationalizations"; a list of the rights of the booklet holder (to receive the best place in the barracks, to get the best uniforms, the unlimited right to receive parcels, etc.); and a quote from Stalin: "The hardworking person feels himself a free citizen of his country, a social activist of a sort. And if he works hard, and gives society that which he can give, he is a hero of labor."<sup>68</sup>

Not everybody would have taken such a prize terribly seriously. Antoni Ekart, a Polish prisoner, also described one such work campaign:

A plywood Board of Honor was put up on which were posted the results of the Socialist Workers' Contests when announced. Sometimes a crude portrait of the leading "shock" man was exhibited, giving details of the records achieved. Almost unbelievable figures, showing outputs of five hundred percent or even one thousand percent of the normal, were shown. This referred to the digging up of the ground with spades. Even the most backward prisoner could understand that to excavate five to ten times more than the standard was impossible...<sup>69</sup>

But the KVCh instructors were also ultimately responsible for convincing "refusers" that it was in their interest to work, not to sit in punishment cells, or to attempt to get by on small rations. Clearly, not many took their lectures seriously: there were too many other ways to persuade prisoners to work. But a few did, much to the delight of the Gulag's bosses in Moscow. In fact, they took this function terribly seriously, and even held periodic conferences of KVCh instructors, designed to discuss such questions as "What are the basic motives of those who refuse to work?" and "What are the practical results of eliminating the prisoners' day off?"

At one such meeting, held during the Second World War, the organiz-

ers compared notes. One acknowledged that some "shirkers" could not work because they were too weak to live off the amount of food they were given. Still, he claimed, even starving people could be motivated: he had told one shirker that his behavior was "like a knife in the neck of his brother, who was at the front." That was enough to persuade the man to ignore his hunger, and work harder. Another claimed he had shown some shirkers photographs of "Leningrad in battle," after which they all went immediately to work. Yet another said that in his camp, the best brigades were allowed to decorate their own barracks, and the best workers were encouraged to plant flowers in their own individual plots. On the minutes from this meeting, preserved in the archives, someone has made a notation beside this latter comment: "*Khorosho!*" "Excellent!"<sup>70</sup>

This sharing of experiences was considered so important that at the height of the war, the Cultural-Educational Department of the Gulag in Moscow took the trouble to print a pamphlet on the subject. The title—with clear religious echoes—was *Return to Life*. The author, one Comrade Loginov, describes a series of relationships he had with prisoner "shirkers." Using clever psychological tactics, he converted every one of them to a belief in the value of hard work.

The stories are fairly predictable. In one of them, for example, Loginov explains to Ekaterina Sh., the educated wife of a man condemned to death for "espionage" in 1937, that her ruined life can once again have meaning within the context of the Communist Party. To another prisoner, Samuel Goldshtein, Loginov recounts Hitler's "racial theories" and explains to him what "Hitler's new order" in Europe would mean for him. So inspired is Goldshtein by this surprising (in the USSR) appeal to his Jewishness, that he wants to leave immediately for the front. Loginov tells him that "today, your weapon is your labor," and persuades him to work harder in the camp. "Your life is needed by your fatherland, and so are you," he tells yet another prisoner who, with tears in his eyes, returns to work upon hearing these words.<sup>71</sup>

Clearly, Comrade Loginov was proud of his work, and applied himself to it with great energy. His enthusiasm was real. The rewards he received for his work were real too: V. G. Nasedkin, then the boss of the entire Gulag system, was so pleased with his effort that he ordered the pamphlet sent to all of the camps in the system, and awarded Loginov a bonus of 1,000 rubles.

Whether Loginov and his shirkers actually believed in what he was

doing is less clear. We do not know, for example, whether Loginov understood, at some level, that many of the people he was "bringing back to life" were innocent of any crime. Nor do we know whether people like Ekaterina Sh. (if she existed) really reconverted to Soviet values, or whether she suddenly realized that by appearing to be so converted she might receive better food, better treatment, or an easier job. The two possibilities are not even mutually exclusive. For people shocked and disoriented by their rapid transition from useful citizen to despised prisoner, the experience of "seeing the light" and rejoining Soviet society may have helped them make a psychological recovery from their experiences, as well as providing them with the better conditions that saved their lives.

In fact, this question—"Did they believe in what they were doing?"—is actually a small part of a much larger question, one which goes to the heart of the nature of the Soviet Union itself: Did any of its leaders ever believe in what they were doing? The relationship between Soviet propaganda and Soviet reality was always a strange one: the factory is barely functioning, in the shops there is nothing to buy, old ladies cannot afford to heat their apartments, yet in the streets outside, banners proclaim the "triumph of socialism" and the "heroic achievements of the Soviet motherland."

These paradoxes were no different within the camps than outside them. In his history of the Stalinist industrial city Magnitogorsk, Stephen Kotkin points out that in the prison newspaper of the Magnitogorsk corrective-labor colony, the profiles of reformed convicts were written in "language strikingly reminiscent of what could be heard from accomplished workers outside the colony: they were laboring, studying, making sacrifices and trying to better themselves."<sup>72</sup>

Still, there was an extra level of strangeness in the camps. If, in the free world, the enormous gap between this sort of Soviet propaganda and Soviet reality already struck many as ludicrous, in the camps, the absurdity seemed to reach new heights. In the Gulag, where they were constantly addressed as "enemies," explicitly forbidden to call one another "comrade," and forbidden to gaze upon a portrait of Stalin, prisoners were nevertheless expected to work for the glory of the socialist motherland, just the same as those who were free—and to participate in "self-taught creative activity" just as if they were doing so out of the sheer love of art. The absurdity was perfectly clear to all. At one point in her camp career, Anna Andreeva became a camp "artist," meaning that she was actually employed to paint those

slogans. This job, very easy by camp standards, certainly saved her health and possibly her life. Yet interviewed years later, she claimed not even to be able to remember the slogans. She said, she supposed, that "the bosses thought them up. Something like, 'We give all of our strength to work,' something like that . . . I wrote them very quickly, and technically very well, but I absolutely forgot everything that I wrote. It was some kind of self-defense mechanism."<sup>73</sup>

Leonid Trus, a prisoner in the early 1950s, was also struck by the pointlessness of the slogans which were plastered all over the camp buildings, and were repeated through the loudspeakers:

There was a camp radio system, which regularly transmitted information on our labor successes, which scolded those who worked badly. These transmissions were very crude, but they reminded me of transmissions I had heard in freedom. I became convinced that they were no different, except that in freedom the people were more talented, they knew how to describe it all in a prettier way . . . but in general [the camp] was the same as freedom—the same posters, the same slogans—except that in the camp the phrases all sounded more absurd. "They took on the job, they finished the job," for example. Or "Labor in the USSR—it is a thing of honesty, of glory, of valor and heroism"—the words of Stalin. Or all of the other slogans, like "We are for peace," or "We welcome peace in the whole world."<sup>74</sup>

Foreigners, who were not used to the presence of slogans and banners, found the work of the "re-educators" even more bizarre. Antoni Ekart, a Pole, described a typical political indoctrination session:

The method employed was as follows. A man from the KVCh, a professional agitator with the mentality of a six-year-old child, would address the prisoners on the nobility of putting all their effort into work. He would tell them that noble people are patriots, that all patriots love Soviet Russia, the best country in the world for the working man, that Soviet citizens are proud to belong to such a country, etc. etc. for two solid hours—all this to an audience whose very skins bore witness to the absurdity and the hypocrisy of such statements. But the speaker is not upset by the cool reception and keeps on speaking. Finally he promises to all "shock" workers better pay, increased rations and improved conditions. The effect on those who are undergoing the discipline of hunger may be imagined.<sup>75</sup>

A Polish deportee had the same reaction to a propaganda lecture he attended in a Siberian camp.

For hours and hours the lecturer went on, trying to prove that God did not exist, that He was nothing but some bourgeois invention. We should consider ourselves lucky to have found ourselves among the Soviets, the most perfect country in the world. Here in the camp we should learn how to work and at last become decent people. From time to time he attempted to give us some education: so he told us that the "earth is round" and he was absolutely convinced we knew nothing about it, and that we were also ignorant of such things as for instance that Crete is "peninsular," or that Roosevelt was some foreign minister. He imparted such truths as these with unshakeable confidence in our complete lack of knowledge, for how could we, brought up in a bourgeois state, expect to have the advantage of even the most elementary education . . . he stressed the point with satisfaction that we could not even dream of regaining our freedom, that Poland would never rise again . . .

Alas for the poor lecturer, continued the Pole; his work was for naught: "The more he held forth about it, the more we rebelled inwardly, hoping against hope. Faces became set with determination."<sup>76</sup>

Another Pole, Gustav Herling, described his camp's cultural activities as a "vestigial reminder of the regulations drawn up in Moscow in the days when the camps really were intended to be corrective, educational institutions. Gogol would have appreciated this blind obedience to an official fiction despite the general practice of the camp—it was like the education of 'dead souls.'"<sup>77</sup>

These views are not unique: they are found in the vast majority of memoirs, most of which either fail to mention the KVCh, or deride it. For that reason, it is difficult, when writing about the function of propaganda in the camps, to know how to rate its importance to the central administration. On the one hand, it can be reasonably argued (and many do) that camp propaganda, like all Soviet propaganda, was pure farce, that no one believed it, that it was produced by the camp administration purely in order to fool the prisoners in a rather juvenile and transparent manner.

On the other hand, if the propaganda, the posters, and the political indoctrination sessions were completely farcical—and if no one believed in them at all—then why was so much real time and real money wasted on

them? Within the records of the Gulag administration alone, there are hundreds and hundreds of documents testifying to the intensive work of the Cultural-Educational Department. In the first quarter of 1943, for example, at the height of the war, frantic telegrams were sent back and forth from the camps to Moscow, as camp commanders desperately tried to procure musical instruments for their prisoners. Meanwhile, the camps held a contest on the theme "The Great Motherland War of the Soviet People Against the German Fascist Occupiers": fifty camp painters and eight sculptors participated. At this time of national labor shortages, the central organs also recommended that every camp employ a librarian, a film technician to show propaganda movies, and a *kultorganizator*, a prisoner assistant to the cultural instructor, who would help conduct the "battle" for cleanliness, raise the cultural level of prisoners, organize artistic activity—and help teach the prisoners to "correctly understand questions of contemporary politics."<sup>78</sup>

The camp cultural instructors also filed semi-annual or quarterly reports on their work, often listing their achievements in great detail. The KVCh instructor of Vosturallag, at the time a camp for 13,000 prisoners, sent one such report, for example, also in 1943. The twenty-one-page report begins with the admission that, in the first half of 1943, the camp's industrial plan was "not fulfilled." In the second half of that year, however, steps were taken. The Cultural-Educational Department had helped to "mobilize prisoners to fulfill and overfulfill the production tasks set by comrade Stalin," to "return prisoners to health and prepare for winter," and to "liquidate insufficiencies in cultural-educational work."<sup>79</sup> The camp KVCh chief then went on to list the methods he deployed. He notes grandly that in the second half of that year, 762 political speeches were given, attended by 70,000 prisoners (presumably, many attended more than once). At the same time, the KVCh held 444 political information sessions, attended by 82,400 prisoners; it printed 5,046 "wall newspapers," read by 350,000 people; it put on 232 concerts and plays, showed 69 films, and organized 38 theatrical groups. One of the latter even wrote a song, proudly quoted in the report:

Our brigade is friendly  
 Our duty calls  
 Our building site waits  
 The Front needs our work.<sup>80</sup>

One can attempt to come up with explanations for this enormous effort. Perhaps the Cultural-Educational Department functioned, within the Gulag bureaucracy, as the ultimate scapegoat: if the plan was not being fulfilled, it was not poor organization or malnutrition that were to blame, not stupidly cruel work policies or the lack of felt boots—but insufficient propaganda. Perhaps the system's rigid bureaucracy was at fault: once the center had decreed there must be propaganda, everyone tried to fulfill the order without ever questioning its absurdity. Perhaps the Moscow leadership was so isolated from the camps that they really did believe that 444 political information sessions and 762 political speeches would make starving men and women work harder—although given the material also available to them in camp inspection reports, this seems unlikely.

Or perhaps there is no good explanation. Vladimir Bukovsky, the Soviet dissident who was later a prisoner himself, shrugged when I asked him about it. This paradox, he said, was what made the Gulag unique: "In our camps, you were expected not only to be a slave laborer, but to sing and smile while you worked as well. They didn't just want to oppress us: they wanted us to thank them for it."<sup>81</sup>