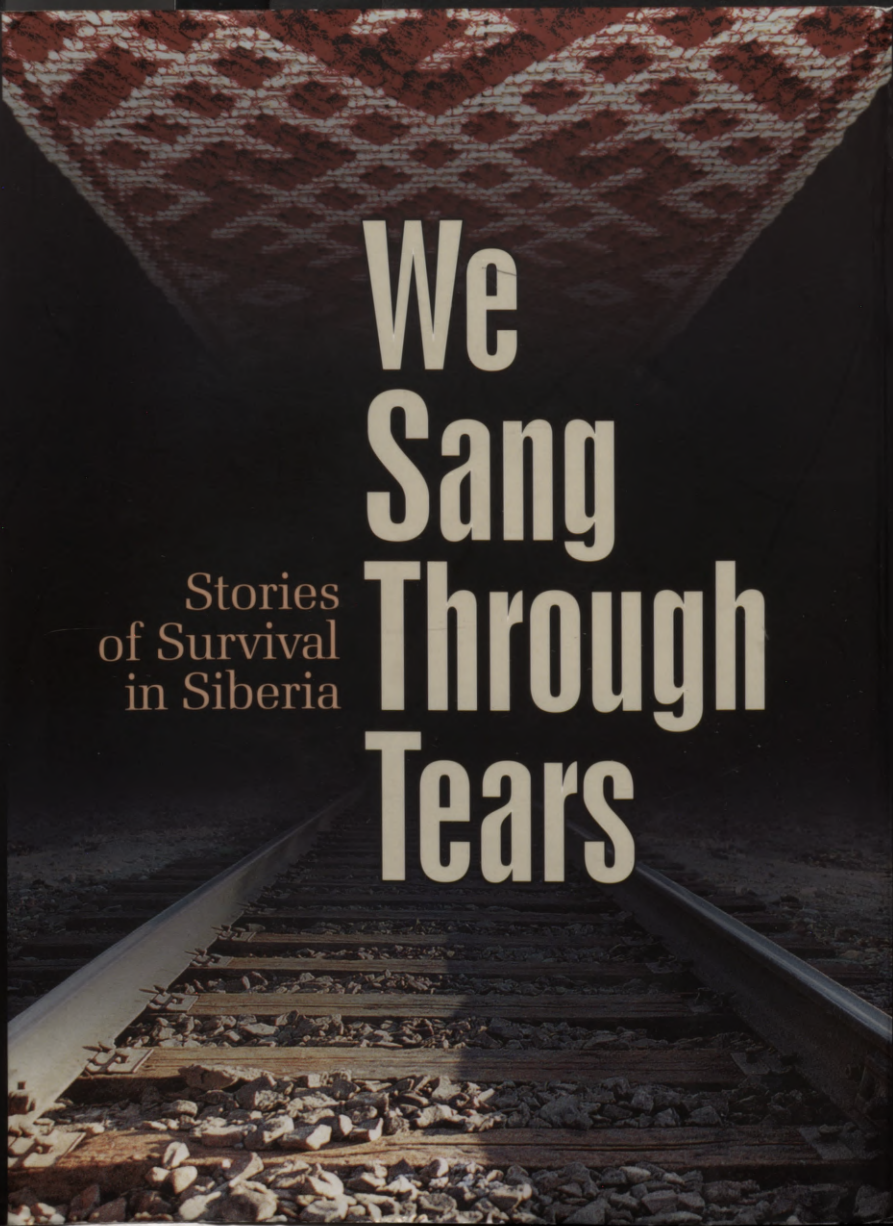
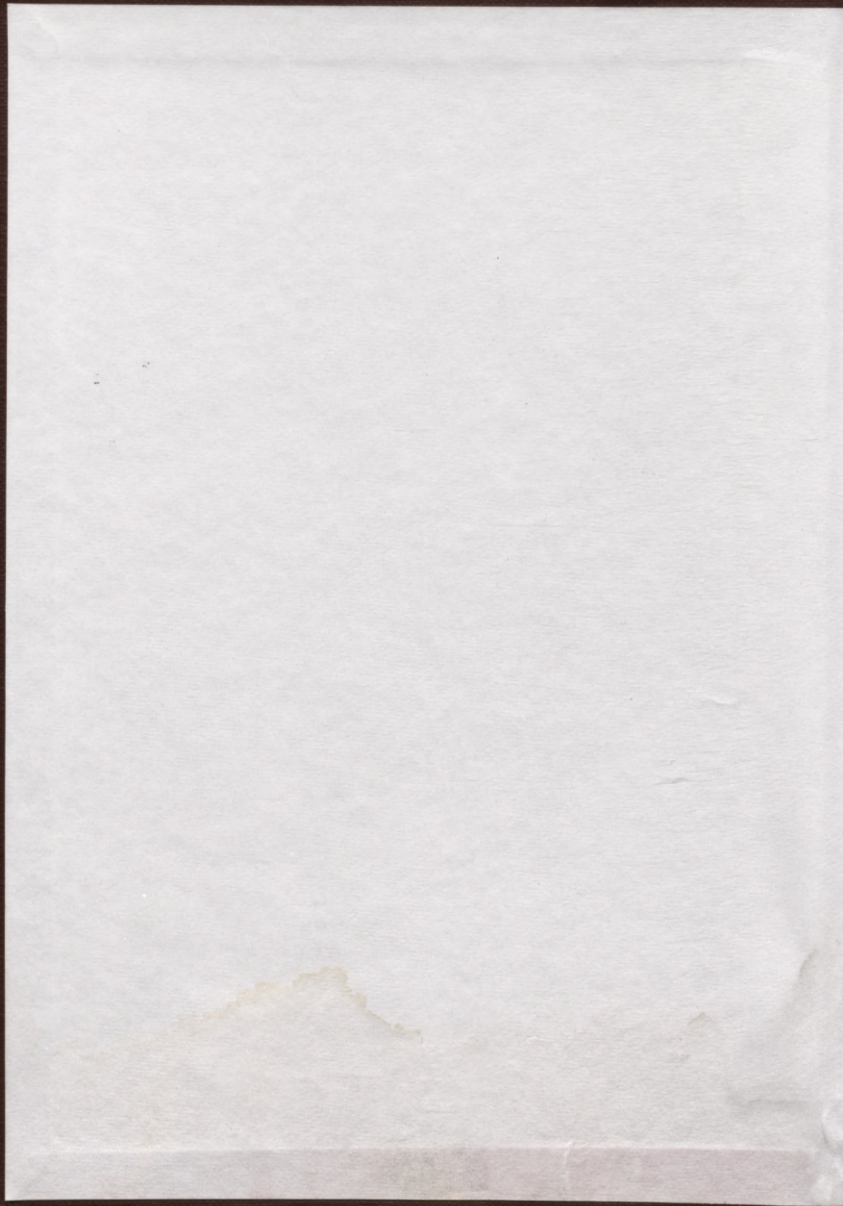


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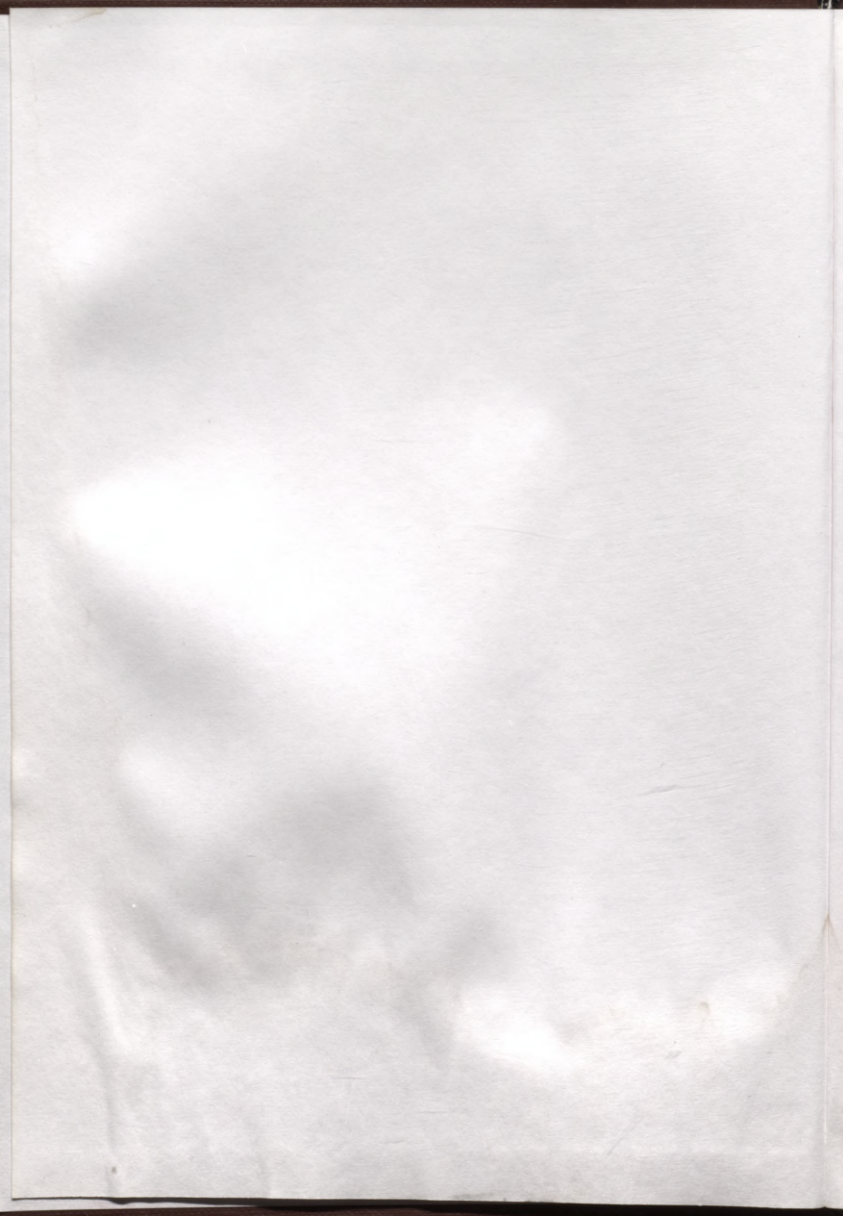
Stories
of Survival
in Siberia

We Sang Through Tears











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We Sang Through Tears

Jānis Roze Publishers

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*This translation is dedicated to all those whose lives
were shattered at a stroke of a pen.*

There are many friends, colleagues and organisations in Australia and Latvia to whom I am indebted for their kind support, much-needed advice and generous help. But above all I would like to thank the following people: Anda Līce for her kind permission to translate a part of *Atva Dabūstas*; Antra Gribiene for her work in helping to select the stories; Inara Graudina and Māra Broča for their translations; Pēteris Mierovids Balodis and his daughter Zina Pāpule for the many hours spent for her drawings of the trees, nuts and seeds of the pines, spruce, fir and a wild cherry tree and Guntars Edmonds Silkāns for editing the translation and writing the foreword, and Janis Dzelde for bringing my manuscript into the computer age. The book has been published with the support of the Latvian Federation of Australia and New Zealand.

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PREFACE

For a very long time these testimonies were buried deep in people's hearts, for that was the safest place where neither the Cheka interrogators nor the prison or camp supervisors could break in. It was only later that they were written down, when one returned from an unjustly imposed banishment. Some deportees managed to record their experiences while still in labour camps and exile, and by quite incredible means smuggle them out of the gulags. But there, too, the truth could not be revealed – harsh penalties awaited those who tried. Publishing one's memoirs was out of the question. And yet some succeeded in sending their writing abroad through the Iron Curtain. The free world was shocked by the facts described and the reality of the experiences.

Sadly, many of those who recorded their memories did not live to see Latvia's rebirth and restoration of independence. Their friends and relatives brought their accounts to a commission set up in March 1988 under the auspices of the Latvian Writers' Association to investigate the evils inflicted by Stalin's «personality cult». Within a short time so many manuscripts had accumulated that it was decided to publish them in a series of books under the title «Via Dolorosa».

It was an unforgettable time for those of us who read and listened to these personal accounts. We felt stunned, as if suddenly an alien continent had emerged before our eyes. An era of atheism

and faith, despair and hope, hate and love was revealed. No film or novel can compare with these testimonies written in blood. It was as if a new genre in Latvian literature had been born – first-hand accounts of the victims of Stalinism. By reading them, we were able to look much deeper into the recent past and into other people's as well as our own lives, but above all, realise that those who had lost so much were, despite everything, able to triumph over the Communist system and ideology. Their stories now bear witness to the world on their own behalf as well as that of their perished companions.

Anda Līce

Compiler of «Via Dolorosa»

Rīga, Latvia

1998

INTRODUCTION

This is not a book about hate and vengeance. This is a book about love and remembrance, a collection of personal memories not to be forgotten. For those who do not care to remember the misfortunes of the past are condemned to suffer similar ones in the future.

The mass deportations and executions perpetrated by the Soviet Union in the Baltic states of Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania after their occupation in 1940 and resumed after the end of World War II were – to use a more recent term – a Baltic holocaust. In their scale, relating to the size of the population involved, these events are frightening. No less than 200,000 persons, about 10 per cent of the population of Latvia of 2 million, were affected, in one way or another, by the punitive measures of the occupying power. Among the deportees were people aged 80 and older, and children and infants.

What were the reasons, the origins, the historical roots of the events of 1941 and 1949 in Latvia?

There is a school of thought which regards Soviet Communism as just a passing phase of traditional Russian imperialism. These scholars point to the invasion of Latvia and Estonia (then Livonia) by Russian tsars such as Ivan the Terrible in the 16th century, and to the attempts of Peter the Great in the 18th century to carve a «window to Europe» for Russia across the Baltic lands.

The result of these efforts was felt until 1918 when Latvia, together with its sister states Estonia and Lithuania, proclaimed its independence, severing its ties with Russia and turning towards the West. In the Peace Treaty of Rīga, signed on 11 August, 1920, Soviet Russia «willingly and for time eternal» renounced «all sovereign rights which Russia has possessed with respect to the Latvian people and territory».

A brief but prosperous period of independent Latvian statehood followed, interrupted again by World War II, prior to which Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union divided Eastern Europe between them by the infamous Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 23 August, 1939. The Baltic states, together with Finland and the eastern parts of Poland and Romania, were again assigned to Russia, the rest of continental Europe – to Germany.

On the very day the German armour entered Paris – 14 June, 1940 – Soviet tanks invaded Lithuania, the southernmost of the Baltic states. Latvia's and Estonia's turn came within days. Long before that, on 11 October, 1939 – when the Baltic countries were still fully independent, sovereign states, – the Deputy Commissar (Minister) of State Security of the USSR, General Serov, signed Order No. 001223 «regarding the procedure for carrying out deportations of anti-Soviet elements from Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia». Nine months later, having secured the Baltic states militarily, the Soviets proceeded with a systematic «ethnic cleansing» – again to use a contemporary term – of the occupied territories. Individual arrests and imprisonments were followed by mass deportations of people to Russia, culminating in June 1941 and in March 1949, when more than 100,000 people from Latvia were deported to Siberia from what was now «the Soviet West».

Introduction

This book relates some of the suffering and deprivations of the deportees, many of whom never returned to Latvia. The collection of their stories does not harbour feelings of hate or vengeance. It witnesses the love and affection of these unfortunate people for their families, their people and their country. Their stories have to be recorded for posterity as a small attempt to prevent a repetition of their sufferings.

For eternal vigilance is supposed to be the price of freedom.

Emils Dēliņš

*OAM (Order of Australia Medal),
Hon. Consul-General of Latvia*

Latvian National
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The following information was obtained from a review of the files of the State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency concerning the activities of the Communist Party, U.S.A., in the United States and abroad. It is noted that the Communist Party, U.S.A., has been active in the United States and abroad since its formation in 1919. The Party has been active in the United States and abroad since its formation in 1919. The Party has been active in the United States and abroad since its formation in 1919. The Party has been active in the United States and abroad since its formation in 1919.

On the very day the German attack entered Paris - 14 June 1940 - Soviet tanks entered Lithuania. The governments of the Baltic states, Latvia and Estonia, were asked to sign a pact before that, on 11 October, 1939, the Baltic states were asked to sign an independent sovereignty pact. The Department of State Security of the USSR, General Secretary Joseph Stalin, regarding the procedure for the signing of the pact. The Baltic states were asked to sign a pact before that, on 11 October, 1939, the Baltic states were asked to sign an independent sovereignty pact. The Department of State Security of the USSR, General Secretary Joseph Stalin, regarding the procedure for the signing of the pact.

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MEMORIES

Valija Kalēja (Kakse)

THE FIRST NOTEBOOK

It was my first year as a teacher in the Plāņi four-grade primary school. On the afternoon of 3 July, 1946, I was doing the laundry in the school yard. Two armed soldiers appeared before me and ordered me to follow them to my apartment immediately. A uniformed man was already waiting there. He informed me that I was under arrest and was to change quickly and go with him. My protests that I couldn't leave my children unsupervised were ignored. While I was dressing, they carried out a cursory inspection of my drawers, bookshelves, wardrobe and albums. My children, a seven-year-old girl and a four-year-old boy, rushed into the apartment in tears. I was forcibly pulled away from their embrace and sent out onto the main road, where a vehicle was already waiting with several women who had also been arrested.

We were taken to the barn of a homestead in the village of Bilska. A lot of people were already there, and they were called out for interrogation the whole night through. I didn't know anyone.

I was interrogated the following morning. It was difficult to comprehend the reason, for I had forgotten about the English grammar book I had lent to a pupil that winter. The interrogator

yelled that I should stop denying everything and admit frankly to spying and collaborating with «bandits»¹, for they already had this information as a result of their investigations. My response was that I didn't know anything.

Three bearded men were brought in one by one. They all stated that they had never seen me before and were in no way connected with me. One of them, Dāvids Purgailis, said that his sister, a school-

girl, had given him the English grammar book. There was no discrepancy, no substantiation, yet I was not released.

A full load of us «criminals» was driven to Valka. We crammed into a smoky home-built birchwood sauna. The smoke had presumably been made for our «comfort». We were no longer interrogated there, neither were we fed, if I remember correctly. For the time being there was obviously no room at the Cheka in Stabu Street². After a couple of days we were taken there.



A home-built sauna.

¹ «Bandits» – members of the Latvian Legion and other freedom fighters who, at war's end, managed to escape capture by the new Soviet occupants. They hid in forests, some till as late as the early 1950s, in the vain hope that the West would come to aid to restore Latvia's independence.

² *The Cheka in Stabu Street* – The headquarters of the Secret Police (or Cheka) were for a great many years in a still extant building on the corner of Stabu Street and Brīvības Street, inner Riga's main thoroughfare, which bore the name of Lenin Street during the period of Soviet occupation.

An overpowering feeling of terror and hopelessness came over me as we drove into the yard of the Soviet Secret Police and the heavy iron gates closed behind us with a clang. It was 7 or 8 July. We were ordered to strip and had to go through an embarrassing and very brutal physical examination, in which our mouths as well as other orifices lower in the body were checked. Following that, watches, wedding rings, jewellery and bits of paper and pencils were confiscated. Then we were all put into prison cells. I was shoved into one that was narrower than one's height. It was possible to lie down only by drawing up one's legs or putting them up against the wall, because there was no room for them if you slept on your side. At times there were ten of us there. In the corner there was the so-called «parasha», a latrine bucket frequently used by all the occupants, who were a bundle of nerves with the fear of the well-known interrogations. There was this «pleasant» aroma, lack of air, heat and hunger in the cell. A bulb burnt all day and night and prevented sleep. You were not allowed to close your eyes and snooze during the day, that meant breaking the rules. For lunch you had to gulp down very hot soup. We had very little time to do that because the guards didn't wait one minute longer, and you had to return the bowl even if you hadn't finished and were racked by hunger pangs. The moment in the morning when we would be herded to the washroom was eagerly awaited. I always tried to dash under a cold shower to refresh my parched body, if only for a little while.

On one occasion, as we were marching to the washroom, I happened to glance sideways. Instantly a guard's yell resounded, «Damn fascist woman!» This was followed by such a mighty kick to my bottom that I fell down. My interrogators didn't abuse me physically like this, although wild yelling and waving a fist or

revolver in front of my eyes did occur. However, physical abuse did take place, as I could see by the bruises my cellmate had on her when I arrived. We avoided talking about it because everyone believed there were microphones in the walls.

The last three days and nights in that horrific building in Stabu Street were indescribably difficult and filled with despair. Were they only the actions of vicious guards contravening rules and regulations, or was it torture ruthlessly organised in collusion with the interrogator?

One day I suddenly heard knocking on the wall which sounded as if it was coming from a pipe. I had been leaning against the wall. Thereupon the same vicious guards rushed into the cell and, grabbing me by the arm, pulled me out the door. I was barefoot and wearing nothing but a thin robe. I was hurried a considerable distance along corridors then pushed into a small room the door of which was locked. There was a board bunk all along the wall (about one metre), an earthen floor, a plaster wall with desperately scribbled words on it, a bulb with bars on it and a live, buzzing fly, my only companion. After the heat in the cell I was very cold. I jumped on and off the bench and exercised continually, only sitting down for a while when I became tired. I could tell if it was night or the beginning of another day by the street sounds. Cold and hunger tormented me. I can't recall now whether I was given any food. I don't think so.

Two days later, in the evening, a guard hurried me down several flights of stairs to a room in the cellar. «The torture chamber» – the thought made me numb with fear. I was put in a fairly big, very damp cell. Dirty water was dripping down the walls and the floor was muddy, almost wet. But it was warm. I was exhausted and wanted to sleep so I found the driest spot, knelt and attempted

to calm down and listen to the awesome silence. I could hear some kind of continuous dripping. Then I could make out a plaintive groan. «Don't... I'll tell you everything, everything...» I was terror-stricken. Perhaps I was only hallucinating because of extreme stress and exhaustion? It was horrible.

Suddenly the door was unlocked and a guard of medium build and south-eastern ethnic origin³ pushed a wooden stretcher-like cot towards me. I cried out in fear but he calmed me saying in a kind voice, «Don't be afraid, dear, have a rest. I'll take it away in the morning. It's not right.» I fell asleep and didn't hear anything.

The next morning I was taken straight to the interrogator. In a derisive tone he asked me if I had reconsidered everything. Could I perhaps reveal some new facts, tell the truth? I answered emphatically: «There is only one truth, I have told you repeatedly and I have nothing to add.»

He took some kind of concocted written accusation out of the drawer and an extract from the interrogations. There was something about active participation in bourgeois society; about an attitude not befitting a Soviet citizen when I didn't follow the retreating Red Army⁴; and about withholding information. The version about spying was not mentioned nor the one about my collaboration with «bandits». I signed. I was not taken back to the cell. My clothes were given back and I was taken to Central Prison. That was in the first half of September 1946.

³ *Of south-eastern ethnic origin* – The reference is apparently to one of the Moslem countries which were constituent republics of Soviet Union; when viewed from Latvia these are in the distant south-east.

⁴ *The retreating Red Army* – The onslaught of Nazi German forces in late June/early July 1941 forced the Red Army to leave Latvia and retreat to Russia. Latvian citizens who at this time likewise departed from Latvia in an easterly direction would have gained «bonus points» for this indication of loyalty to the Soviet Union and the Communist cause.

I spent two very difficult months in the horrendous establishment in Stabu Street, a time during which one's every nerve and sinew were strained, they made sure of that. Often there would suddenly come the sound of loud gramophone music from the floor above where the interrogation room was. We assumed it was a silencer used during certain methods of interrogation. On many occasions our cellmates did not return but were placed elsewhere.

CENTRAL PRISON

I was in Central Prison from the beginning of September 1946 until about the middle of April 1947. My first cell was a very large room with a few barred windows. The glass up to the height of a person was opaque, only the top part was transparent.

There were about 70 of us, ranging from young women of school age to old grey-haired mothers. There was a big latrine bucket near the door. Shabby, dilapidated little straw bags were used to lie on at night.

In the mornings we were taken to the washroom in small groups. It was possible to stand under the cold shower a little longer as not everyone used it. In this way I started to toughen myself up regularly. I don't know how many grams of bread we received, but we were always hungry. The soups were very watery. Relatives did try to bring something but the rules were so inhumane that only rarely did anyone succeed in obtaining a parcel or seeing a relative, for a ban was usually imposed on all of us as a result of one individual breaking a rule. The ban was generally in force for two weeks and no-one received parcels during that

time. Some of the infringements of the rules were: standing up on something to look through the window; or having on you in the course of a search a sharp object, something written down or a note from another cell; or an interpersonal conflict which not surprisingly occurred in such a large group of imprisoned people.

I personally received only one parcel during these seven long months, even though every month my sister and beloved mother came all the way from the northern region of Vidzeme. Prisoners were also supposed to have walks in the yard, which we looked forward to eagerly, but these pleasant five or ten minutes didn't always eventuate either, for time and again a breach of regulations had occurred.

On one occasion, in order to avert an imminent ban on parcels, I and Laima Upīte, a pharmacy student, volunteered to confess our «guilt». We came forward instead of two dear old ladies who had managed to reach the window to look at their sons in the exercise yard. Refusal to own up would have again led to a ban on parcels. We opted for solitary confinement in a cold cell on reduced rations. It was December, the temperature was below zero. Fortunately we were both put together into an icy hovel in the cellar. We were terribly cold but we danced and sang. I learned to dance the Lambeth Walk. And so we didn't freeze to death and were glad that we had spared the old ladies a great deal of trouble. We were released the next day.

It was a feature of Central Prison that the inmates of a cell were frequently moved to other blocks. Prisoners were also moved around from cell to cell. In addition there were traitors who had been promised freedom. One of these was Mrs Medau and she was sent from one cell to another. In our cell she informed on three young women who she said were hiding letters in the

bedding sacks. There was a check straightaway and the letters were found. She had done the same thing in her previous cell. The three women were kept in isolation for five days. When they came out they were morally prepared to teach the evil woman a lesson. There was no shortage of courageous helpers. Knots were tied at the ends of towels. Two women took up their positions at the latrine bucket. Others grabbed the guilty party, pulled her clothes over her head and, holding her tight, pulled her towards the bucket, dipped the knotted towels into the «aromatic liquid» and gave her back a thorough thrashing. Luckily the guards didn't notice this punitive action and there was no punishment or repression against us. Only the delightful aroma lingered on in our quarters. The punished woman left our cell that same day. Her case came before the court before our group's. She was given ten years anyway, her treacherous services did not guarantee her freedom.

Time passed slowly. Hunger, boredom. We would teach each other poems, write them ourselves and sing softly. On Sunday mornings we would quietly hold a service. A woman from Kurzeme conducted it. We would say the Lord's Prayer and recite various well-known Latvian poems. We were preparing for Christmas Eve, but the cell inmates were again transferred. It was my turn to spend time in the most dreaded block, namely number 4, the one for prisoners sentenced to death. There were solitary confinement cells on the top floor.

The temperature outside was a constant 20°C below zero. We four women were put into a small cell on the second floor with a half-broken window pane. The temperature inside was below zero, the water in the mug froze during the night. We had two metal beds. We squatted on them like ruffled-up sparrows, cover-

ing our numbed feet with our bodies. In the mornings we were led to the first floor to have a wash. A layer of ice had formed underneath the shower tap, but I still forced myself to stand on the ice and have a quick shower. I felt warm for quite a while after.

Christmas came and went. The bells in the towers of Rīga rang in the New Year. The cold weather continued. I was waiting impatiently for the day in court, hoping that I would be released, as I was not guilty of anything.

I was informed that my case would be heard on 7 January, 1947. But I had caught a cold after all. However, I didn't want the case postponed, for the number of people to be sentenced had grown to thirty. I didn't tell anyone about my illness and allowed myself to be taken to the High Court building, although I was feeling very sick. My joints were aching and I was feverish and dizzy.

The hall was full of prisoners from our group. Only the main «bandits» were separated by a barrier. I sat down on a bench right at the back, leant back and, half-conscious, dozed off without hearing or seeing what went on.

My case was not heard. I was again crammed into the Black Maria, taken to the prison and back again the following morning. I was very ill. Cases continued to be heard throughout the day. I was called last. The allegations were read out the way they had been fabricated, that is, about my involvement with the bourgeoisie, but there was no mention of specific collaboration with «bandits». That was why I did not raise any objections and, as far as I can remember, no further questions were asked. As if in a nightmare I waited for the verdict, glad that I had managed to reach the bench and sit down without collapsing. As if in a nightmare I heard the appalling sentences being pronounced. Some people were sentenced to death, others got 25, still others 15 years in dislocation. Most received

10 years with disenfranchisement⁵ for 5 additional years. And the two of us got 5 years. It seemed that no-one was freed.

All these people were strangers to me and I myself was ill, that was why I neither heard nor understood why they were convicted. All I know is that the paragraph applied to me was number 58;12⁶. and it carried a 5-year sentence. I don't recall an additional 3 years of disenfranchisement being added. It was only later, after an appeal sent to Moscow⁷, that I remember these 3 years being read out. It is possible that they were added in Moscow to the 5 years in a corrective labour camp.

After the case was heard, we were taken back to Central Prison, to a large cell with all the people sentenced. A medical worker was called. My temperature was 39.7°C. Gradually I recovered, for the temperature indoors was not zero or below. I became acquainted with the women who were in a similar situation, and they were all surprised that I had not been released, as they had actually been involved in helping and communicating with «the enemy».

All hope was now lost. I had to face the gloomy reality, suppress all my emotions and longing for my children. I had to face

⁵ *Disenfranchisement* – In Soviet Latvia, disenfranchisement meant, in addition to not having the right to vote, a ban to follow a profession, or to register as an inhabitant in Riga and other larger cities.

⁶ Under the Soviet legal system, Article 58 was included in the criminal code. It dealt with crimes against the state. From 1934 on, subsections 1a, 1b, 1c and 1d were added to punish persons for «treason to the Motherland». Accordingly, all actions directed against the military power of the USSR were punishable by execution (1b), or by 10 years in prison (1a). The latter was imposed only on civilians or under mitigating circumstances. Section 12 was applied to persons who failed to denounce any action against the state.

⁷ *An appeal sent to Moscow* – The constituent republics of the Soviet Union were semi-autonomous in name only, in fact all important decisions were made in Moscow.

the prospect of not seeing them in the near future. About a month later the results of the appeal came from Moscow, but the situation remained essentially the same.

We couldn't understand why we were still being kept in prison. The guards had told someone that everyone was being held for a large prisoner transport to Kolyma, organised every spring. All the cells were overflowing with prisoners. And so time dragged on in hunger, boredom and depression until the middle of April. Then a long column was formed and the prisoners were driven on foot to the so-called «peresilka», a transit prison. I don't know where it was, for at that time I wasn't familiar with the suburbs of Rīga. We spent about a week there. My name was not on the list of people destined for Kolyma. The following day, when those going there were already lined up, the convoy guard ordered me and another woman, who stoked the fire in the washrooms, to get ready on the double, as two people on the list had a fever. The plan had to be followed⁸, as usual.

We were led up to a very long column that was already on its way to some barred railroad carriages. Political prisoners and common criminals were all mixed up. Men were at the head, women at the rear of the column. In this same order we boarded the endlessly long line of barred wagons. Ironically⁹ this horrendous journey began on 23 April, in the year 1947.

⁸ *The plan had to be followed* – Orders were to be followed meticulously, especially in the Stalin era. Neither common sense nor unforeseen situations were supposed to ever interfere with the planners' omniscient expectations.

⁹ *Ironically* – The irony is in the date, 23 April. On this particular day for centuries past, itinerant Latvian rural labourers and servants had changed masters, leaving one homestead and moving with all their belongings to live and work in another till at least the following spring. Thus 23 April had, since time immemorial, been a travelling day.

We were put in a wagon together with convicted criminals and a strange person, who was dressed like a man and, in a woman's voice, claimed to be a man. This person made it very difficult for us to perform our natural functions.

The two-month journey was terribly long and difficult. We experienced humiliation, hunger and also terror when our cutter began to sink as it was sailing out of the Bay of Vanino. About an hour after leaving port, it developed a leak, and water gradually flowed into the cabins. The lights went out and the criminals assaulted us and robbed us of all the clothes we had, even the ones we were wearing. However, the ship did not sink but docked at a camp for female convicts on the shores of the Sea of Okhotsk. We were forced to stay there in shocking conditions, starving, worn out and terrorised by the felons. At times we received no bread for as long as three days. In the mornings, instead of bread, a hot mash made from trashy flour was doled out, but not into bowls. It was ladled out hot from an army boiler straight into cupped hands. But because of scalding, the portion was all too frequently dropped, and so you had to go hungry all day. Even though it looked appalling and was morally degrading, we were forced to take the ration of gruel in the flap of our dresses or shirts. When there was bread, although bitter from the things added to it, we were in a better mood, for we didn't have to humiliate ourselves and listen to the convicts' derision.

We spent two agonising weeks like that. We went to the toilet in groups, because those monstrous women wanted to strip us. I was lucky and was still wearing my leather boots, and the thieves naturally stalked me continually. We didn't dare to sleep at night, one of us had to stand guard by the door to sound the alarm. All the guards were hand in glove with the women convicts, who were in the habit of calling us damned fascists.

The Estonian women were more courageous and threw stones at them that they had hidden in their pockets. I don't know how it had come about that there were Estonian and Lithuanian women in this prisoner transport. A wagon must have been coupled to the train, or they must have been put on board the ship in the Bay of Vanino.

At long last this difficult period was over and we were put on a very large seagoing vessel. That was in June, and fortunately there were no storms at sea. The food was slightly better than in the camp, although we seemed to have become accustomed to the constant hunger pangs. Unfortunately most of us were suffering from diarrhoea. Moreover, the lively activity on our bodies and in our hair was unpleasant, for no matter how hard we tried to prevent it, the conditions during this «world trip» were simply too unhygienic.

I don't remember how long the voyage lasted, but I know that it was nearly Midsummer Night. On the eve of this festival it was announced that we were approaching our destination, the port of Magadan. The ship berthed in a harbour that looked like a nest a swallow had made at the foot of a cliff one kilometre high. The road to the centre of the city led upwards right along the edge of the seacoast. There was a mountain range on the other side, with dwarf birch trees sticking out here and there.

The convoy guards bellowed at us to march faster. It was hard for us, starved as we were, to go uphill. It was 3 kilometres to the transit camp. The long, wretched column of slaves was moving slowly, and the bleak future weighed heavily on our minds.

There was a lighter moment that evening in June 1947. Each of us received, in addition to the normal bread ration, a good quality herring, a whole one each. It seemed an indescribable delicacy

after the flavourless food we'd eaten so long. I exchanged my piece of bread for another herring. We were taken to the bath-house, too. All our clothes were put through a high temperature room. Afterwards there was a feeling of comfort. We had washed ourselves in warm water, our clothes were «above suspicion» and we had a herring in the stomach. Only our appearance was pitiful – the clothes were crumpled. Our hearts ached and we longed for our dear ones in our distant homeland...

SLAVE MARKET

One day later we had to enter the famous slave market arena, where the chiefs of various departments had gathered. Dressed in army officer uniforms, they walked haughtily past the lined-up slaves. In choosing workers from among the ones in our room, priority was given to the commander of a forced-labour, agricultural type of camp called «Balagannaya» in the Taniska region. It is impossible to describe the emotions that this degrading, horrible procedure aroused. Stepping forward, he asked in a loud voice, «Where are the Latvian and Lithuanian women?» Having examined everyone from head to toe several times, he pointed to one woman and ordered her to come out in front. I was in this group also, and considered myself lucky, because I'd be working outdoors, if nothing else. Mining and panning for gold seemed terrifying.

The convoys immediately took all thirty of us to the port. For about eight hours we sailed on a small vessel on the Sea of Okhotsk. Towards evening we reached «Balagannaya», a wharf in the estuary of the River Tauya, which at high tide was navigable

for quite large boats. With a change of moon phase, the tidal flows altered from 2 metres to 6 metres. The sea was 7 kilometres from there.

The camp was about a kilometre from the wharf. The road was fenced in on both sides with a thick, unbroken hedge of sweet briar that was already in blossom. It was lovely to see it, because the flowers and greenery we hadn't seen for a year calmed our agitated thoughts until we reached the camp gates. Our pleasant impressions vanished when a thorough examination began, which included that of the body, pockets and the tiny bundles we were carrying. That put an end to any feelings of optimism.

THE SECOND NOTEBOOK

I was sent to «Balagannaya», a forced-labour and re-education camp in the Magadan region, to serve my unjust five-year sentence. It was an unconventional, unique forced-labour camp organised along agricultural lines and located in the Arctic permafrost region. As far as hardship was concerned, it could not be compared to the camps where thousands of lives were extinguished. However, the winding path I was destined to take was difficult both physically and mentally, and entailed extraordinary incidents that brought me to the brink of death.

The Latvian and Lithuanian political prisoners were brought here from Magadan and housed in low barracks in a camp among common criminals. We were constantly called «damned fascists». However, several of us shared quarters. We had shelf-like double bunks in groups of four, a bedding sack and pillow filled with straw, and a blanket. And, as a bonus, bedbugs that made falling asleep difficult even when exhausted.

In the mornings we received our bread ration, 500–700 g if I remember correctly. We ate in the canteen in the mornings and evenings. For lunch there was soup and gruel. Lunch and dinner were usually combined – after work. If the weather conditions were normal, there were no free days. These were only given if there was heavy rain or a blizzard. Like other camps, this one was surrounded by a barbed wire fence, with guard towers in every corner. Near the gate you had to go through a room where you could be frisked. If you had something on you, it was confiscated and you were sentenced to solitary confinement in an isolator.

Around the camp between clumps of sweet briar and alder bushes were extensive hand-cultivated fields of cabbage, potatoes and some corn that never ripened. Potatoes were planted when they had good-sized shoots, and they had to be lifted in August. They were not of good quality because of the frozen ground and the cool, windy weather. Cabbages grew very well, and they were sent by ship to Magadan and the large surrounding region. Corn stalks were used for straw. All the large fields were liberally doused with diluted faecal matter from the camp toilets. In appreciation for work done, prisoners received only soup made from fermented green leaves, silage really only fit for cattle.

For us, the chosen ones, the first workday began with the notorious sprinkling operation in the cabbage field. Barrels of the «aromatic» liquid and pouring vessels were already waiting for us, as well as the task of carefully raking the soil around the plants with our bare hands. The incredibly tasty bread and tea that had been consumed in the morning ended up exactly where the foul-smelling liquid was poured out. There is no need for further comment or explanation. It was extremely hard to get used to this unhygienic work. The first round lasted ten days. I was

rescued from the following one by a stroke of luck – I was chosen for pig-herding work. This state farm had just started pig raising and fifty six-month-old pregnant sows had been brought here. The administration centre for the state farm was in the village with the dock for ferries, and labour was readily available from the prison camp. Those who had completed their sentence and the personnel in charge lived in the village. Here and there along the banks of the Tauya River were the native inhabitants' yourts. They fished and hunted seals and birds in the sea.

There were two departments, a large fishing and fish processing section, and a small crop growing and cattle and pig raising one with about 50 head of cattle and 50 pregnant sows. During the three summer months the sows were kept on the bank of a Tauya tributary, about 7 kilometres from the village. These places were nicknamed «postings abroad». This time, following the old method, only Latvian women were lined up. The camp supervisor, after looking us over carefully, beckoned to me to come forward and permitted me to choose a partner. Naturally I chose Marianna, a girl who occasionally had an attack of nerves, but regained her composure under my guidance. She had already jumped into the sea once when we were herded the second time onto the ship in Vanino Bay.

After receiving a ten-day ration of bread at the food distribution centre, as well as other dry rations and the clothes issued previously, we bade farewell to our companions. On the other side of the camp gate a splendid «carriage» awaited us – a large heavily loaded cart, and harnessed to it, an ox blessed with enormous horns. There was no convoy guard. The driver was a female convict, who delivered cattle fodder to summer camps. The ox stopped frequently and didn't respond to the whip. A much more

effective way was shouting the usual three Russian swear-words into its ear.

It was a pleasant ride. There were briar-rose bushes in bloom and clusters of mountain ash on the high banks of the Tauya, and on the other side a cedar forest and clumps of an unusual pine. The most enjoyable thing was the absence of a guard, but the aroma of soya-bean cakes that tickled our noses gave rise to high hopes that perhaps some of them would reach our empty stomachs.

We were welcomed by an understanding work-brigade leader, a Ukrainian and himself a prisoner, but got a cool reception from two women prisoners, one of them Ukrainian, the other Tatar, who worked as «cooks for the pigs». The leader explained what our duties would be. He advised us to be careful in getting accustomed to the soya-bean cakes. He also told us how to make a compote from oats ground with husks on.

Each of us was allocated 25 pigs and a separate pigsty. We were also shown a clearing surrounded on three sides by the huge taiga that stretched as far as the Yakut Autonomous S.S.R. Bears had apparently been seen in the larch-tree forest. We had to mind the grazing pigs for four hours in the morning and five in the afternoon. At midday the pigs had a three-hour rest in the enclosure, while we each had to carry forty buckets of water up a very steep, high river bank. These orders came from the camp supervisor. We were glad that we had been spared hunger, but hauling the water was very difficult. Our legs ached and we suffered from varicose veins. Minding the pigs was horrible, for we were afraid that they might wander off into the forest. Some of them were not «expectant mothers» but «virgins» driven by instinct and, dissatisfied with the boundaries of the clearing, kept heading for the forest.

I will never forget a bad experience I had one afternoon. I got carried away by a berry bush I had unexpectedly found. While eating the delicious berries, I lost sight of the pigs. When I looked up, I froze in terror – there wasn't one pig in the clearing. In desperation I ran along the edge of the clearing, hoping to hear or see some sign of them. It was a very dry summer. Finally I noticed a path among the larch-trees and something that looked like a pig's mark. In a daze I followed the path, not knowing where or how far it would lead. Exhausted and almost at my wits' end, I noticed that I had come to the edge of the forest. I reached the road which ran alongside the river. A steep slope led to the arm of the river, where there was still wet mud after the ebb tide. And that was where my twenty-four «ladies» were taking a mudbath, and only one sow, unlucky in love, was standing there and grunting, but no-one accepted her invitation to keep running. I was beside myself with joy and kissed the first muddy pig on the ear because we were out of danger. Having found my bearings by the setting sun, I arrived back with my muddy caravan at midnight. A worried brigade commander and Marianna were waiting for me. My terrible violation of work regulations was not revealed.

Yet despite everything, we were well off there. However, we were very sorry for our hungry compatriots and wanted to help them as much as possible by taking them something when we collected our rations every ten days. It was the peak spawning season for the Siberian salmon, and fishing areas 20 kilometres long were set up from the mouth of the Tauya to the sea. The village was located 7 kilometres from the delta. The abundance of fish was indescribable. Fish guts for pig feed were taken away in ox-carts. We picked out the liver and made a «pâté». A couple of days before going to the centre to collect my rations, I used to

spend my free time making this pâté for the girls whose work was cutting green forage.

Taking things into the camp was risky because the guards could search you. I sewed two small, narrow bags, which I would tie around my waist under the clothes. One contained soya-bean cakes, the other some liver pâté. With a smile and a polite greeting to the guard, I would march through danger and was never caught.

In this profession of mine as a pigherd, one summer there was another incident that tested my nerves and had to do with the acquaintance mentioned before, the mottled ox. Some fish guts had been brought precisely at lunchtime, just as we were about to carry up water. The oxcart driver had decided to stay a while and rest, as the ox had walked briskly. I asked her if I could use the oxcart to bring the water. It was possible to drive into the arm of the river half a kilometre from there. I was pleased to get permission, and drove into the stream where I could draw water with a bucket.

The tide was coming in and the water level was rising fast. I had already filled the barrel and was about to leave. As the cart was pulled, one shaft in the complicated harness system became loose. I didn't know how to put on a harness, especially in my agitated state. The water kept rising, it was by then as high as my chest and up to the ox's middle, but the cart refused to budge. I was beside myself – I could swim, but the animal, harnessed as it was to the cart, could perish. That would mean extra years in banishment...

As the water rose, the cart with the barrel did so as well. Without hesitating, I climbed on the ox's back. And so our weird but wonderful shipping device approached the shore, where

there was no danger from the high tide. A harnessing «expert» rushed up and prepared the «amphibian» for travel on land. This transgression also had a happy ending, although I felt more exhausted than if I had carried up a hundred buckets of water.

After that I carried out my duties as pigherd with the utmost care and attention, and no longer tried to find an easier way of carrying up water. There were no more extraordinary incidents.

The summer pig camp was closed in September. The next «mummies» were put into good, warm pens with plenty of room. I was a little envious of them, for their sleep was not disturbed by bedbugs, whereas we had to return to the camp environment with its abundant blessings both physical and moral.

I was straightaway chosen as the night carer of sows with young piglets, the «midwife», so to speak, on night duty responsible for looking after the piglets. It was a terribly difficult and nerve-racking job. I didn't get much sleep in the barrack during the day, so at times I was ready to drop through lack of sleep. The number of new «pig families», some large, others smaller, steadily increased. A strict rule was passed that not one piglet was to perish and if it happened, we would be held responsible.

Three women worked during the day. They fed and cleaned the pigs, and after a certain number of hours, every family had to be put with the sow to suckle, and then taken away again in case the mother trampled or lay on them. My night duties were to carry out the feeding procedure and to deliver piglets. It wasn't easy, as my load kept on increasing. In the early hours of the morning I used to be totally exhausted.

Everything went well for more than a month, but then I committed a serious crime, fortunately without material losses. Having placed the last lot of piglets, ten nice, fat little grunTERS, with the

happy mother, my emotions took the upper hand. I so wanted to remember once more a mother's feeling of bliss when she has her baby at her breast. I sat down and, leaning against the sow's back, felt the power of the wondrous fluid, which was at that moment bonding the mother with her young. In my thoughts I wandered far away from the wretched environment my fate had brought me to. I recalled the happiness I had felt as a mother. I had fallen asleep, as had the piglets with the teats in their little mouths. The sow was also sleeping. An evil voice shattered this beautiful, idyllic peace. The supervisor of the cattle farm yelled, «So that's what you're up to!»

After that I was assigned to sawing firewood in the farmyard from morning till night. It wasn't too hard if the saw was sharp, apart from the fact that it was 20°C below zero and a bitter wind burnt one's face. We worked in pairs, muffled up so much we looked like scarecrows. We could dash into the kitchen, where pigfeed was prepared, warm up a bit and put something in our stomachs that were screaming like our saws. We would get a boiled potato or two, a ladleful of gruel or a handful of soya-bean biscuits. The pigs were even getting herrings. This food was more varied and filling than the one in our canteen.

Days went by, grey and depressing, with a routine befitting the likes of us. The winter brought blizzards, freezing temperatures and a wind characteristic of a coastal region. Like many others, I narrowly escaped death in a northern snowstorm. We had run out of dry firewood on the farm. The manager sent me as the firewood expert to investigate if there were any dry firs in the larch-tree clearing about 2 kilometres away. I left by a well-trodden track on a sunny afternoon. I was plodding through the deep snow and had already found about ten dry fir trees that could be cut, when

it started to become suspiciously cloudy. I hurried homeward. Suddenly a blizzard characteristic for the north blew up. The wind was pelting my face with swirling snow and I couldn't see anything. I moved along slowly, feeling the way with my feet. I realised that daylight was fading, but the terrible snowstorm was still raging. I had no idea how far I had gone.

It had grown completely dark, when I suddenly lost my footing and fell into snow up to my chest. Despite struggling to the point of exhaustion, I could not find a firm foothold. A desire to rest, to sleep came over me. But like a flash of lightning the realisation went through my head: «You mustn't give up, this is not your destiny, your children are waiting for you.»

I began struggling again and managed to grasp a small pole, and using that as a support, I was soon able to feel the solid path underfoot again. Then I continued to move forward on all fours so as not to lose it. At long last I glimpsed a light. That was the camp watchtower. I reached the camp safely. Fortunately I hadn't lost the note permitting me to leave the camp without a guard, so my misdeed didn't fit any category, and again I had a narrow escape.

I continued sawing firewood on the farm for another month. Yet I couldn't forget the fact that I had more or less enough food while my friends, my compatriots, were starving. In the construction brigade were two emaciated Latvian men who had been there since January 1946. On their way from work they passed our fence. We had an arrangement that they would poke around the snow near a certain post, where I frequently left them an extra morsel.

One morning in February, Marusya, a nice Russian woman who looked after pigs, whispered to me what she had overheard. Zoika, a nasty Ukrainian woman, while having sex with the farm

supervisor in a hay shed, had told him that Valija, the fascist, was pinching pig feed and taking it to her fascist friends. Obviously I would be in trouble.

That evening, as we went through the checkpoint, there was a notice in the guard's hut: «So and so, dismissed from the stock raising farm.» Well, what did you expect? A morsel of food had been taken from a satiated pig and given to a hungry human being.

THE THIRD NOTEBOOK

WORK IN THE FOREST, FEBRUARY 1948.

The next morning I was assigned to a forest workers' brigade. Disconsolately I marched behind a long line of woodcutters, men and women. The forest was 4 kilometres away and we were tired before reaching it. We were shown the area to be cleared that day. All the experienced workers scrambled through the thick snow as fast as possible to claim the best fir tree. The two new workers, a Lithuanian woman and I, got what was left. I didn't really want a tall tree, for I was about to cut one down for the first time in my life.

The snow was waist-high, so first of all you had to clear the area around the tree. Next, we began to saw. It was nothing like sawing a horizontal log. No-one gave us any advice, they just jeered at us, saying that now the European intelligentsia would show what they were worth. I had some idea what to do, but my companion, a timid Lithuanian country girl, was a complete beginner. We were both so naive that we didn't know how many cubic metres we had to stack. We managed 1.5 between the two of us. The receiving clerk told us that evening that we had to have 8. Everyone made fun of us. The Lithuanian girl cried, while I stubbornly remained silent and

pretended not to hear the ridicule. We weren't left in the forest, but made to go back to the camp. The next day the Lithuanian girl didn't go to work, she had fallen ill.

My next partner happened to be a kind-hearted elderly Russian woman who knew her job. That evening we had 7 cubic metres. I was utterly exhausted and could barely reach the camp.

For the time being I had enough strength, and it even grew as I became more skilful. But hunger tormented us more and more. I began to save up the bread ration and sell the dry rations. With the 15 roubles thus obtained, it was possible to buy some seal fat offered by hunters standing by the roadside in the evenings. We melted it in cans on the hot iron stoves and dipped our bread in it.

This period as a forest worker was a hard one for me, but I survived and didn't become ill. Seal meat probably saved me from getting scurvy. I tried not to become despondent, not to lose my sense of right and wrong, or the hope in my heart. And so the winter passed, a cold one with lots of deep snow.

In April I was again assigned to work in the fields. For days on end we had to hack at the frozen soil, which was then put into raised beds for cabbage seedlings. Clay pots were also made, in which potatoes were planted and placed on the greenhouse shelves. That was what agriculture consisted of in the Magadan district, and such were the tasks in April and May.

Potatoes and cabbage were planted out in June. The wind was bitter, and our hands were rough and chafed. Our stomachs ached to be filled with real rye bread once more, the kind we had back home. When it rained heavily and we were resting in the barracks, the hardest thing of all was not to give in to the temptation to break off bits of the bread that was under the pillow and smelt so good. There would be nothing to eat for lunch and dinner.

Sea transport resumed. Frequently we were woken up to unload sacks of grain, biscuits, sugar and flour from the barges that had arrived. Women were not spared either, because very few men were left here. There were all kinds of mishaps as we stumbled and collapsed, exhausted, but we had no choice.

One day Olga Savickaite, a pleasant girl from Vilnius, approached me. She said it was a secret, but every summer groups of people were recruited to cut hay in the taiga on the banks of the River Tauya, about 20 kilometres away. She had been offered a place because her friend was on the committee. But she was in a panic, as she didn't know a thing about making hay. We both longed to get away, if only for a few months, because the horrendous «faecal operation» was about to start. So I assured Olga that I would show her and help her in all the tasks, and asked her to register my name, too.

At the beginning of July, at one o'clock in the morning, all the hay makers were assembled. We were given instructions and told about «the plan». We were told to pack our meagre belongings, issued with a cap to protect us against gnats and mosquitoes, and ordered to get into trucks. And so, buoyed by a sense of hope, we got into the heavy vehicles and set off for the unknown.

On the banks of the river was a fairly large distribution centre where scythes, rakes, pitchforks and other tools were kept in a shed. About ten work brigade leaders with previous experience were called out and groups were organised. Olga and I were put into the seventh group. Our leader was an energetic, forty-year-old Ukrainian woman called Nadya. There were three other women and an elderly man named Trofim. We were given a gentle, black horse and an old wooden cart with sides. We piled in all the tools, our belongings and dry rations for the next ten days.

On a fenced-in hillock near the arm of the Tauya was quite a large dugout with wooden bunks along the walls. Incredible swarms of gnats «greeted» us. A fire was made at once and the smoke helped to disperse them.

We started making hay the next morning. The grass was long and easy to cut, only the bushes got in the way, so a great deal of hacking had to be done. My friend Olga tried desperately to chop away with the scythe. I sharpened it and helped her cut the hay in her allocated area. The work would have been delightful except for the dreadful gnats. It was unbearable without protective masks, but it was hard to breathe when wearing them. The brigade leader appointed a woman called Lena as cook and freed her from work in the field. It was her duty to make smoke all night long near the entrance to the dugout to drive away gnats, and also to cook food.

Towards evening some «guests» arrived, men of small stature, very unusual, unattractive fellows, who spoke in barely understandable Russian. They presented Nadya with two large Siberian salmon. When we had eaten, we lay down on the bunk nearby and, exhausted, soon fell asleep. We woke up in horror and nudged each other – the visitors were receiving sexual favours in return for their gift. We were lost for words and could only sigh wearily, as we were afraid to fall asleep again.

The following day we pretended we didn't know anything and worked diligently. The aroma of boiled and fried salmon wafted



A protective mask.

across from the dugout. We were also invited. We ate the soup but didn't touch the fried fish, it seemed revolting. The next evening there were no visitors and we felt relieved. But then five arrived, bearing fish. Olga and I realised that there was trouble ahead, for we would never consent to «that sort of thing». The fellows were neither insistent nor violent when we rejected their advances and expressed our opinion. The two rebuffed fellows went away.

The next morning we were boycotted in all sorts of ways. We collected our bread ration and didn't come home all day. We found some wild garlic and survived on that. For three days we stayed away, cutting hay and eating only bread. Finally the brigade leader apologised and asked us to be friends again, to eat and work together, and not to judge them harshly but look kindly on their goings-on, for they were after all living, breathing women.

We grew accustomed to the work, which was pleasant though not easy. It was good to be outdoors and enjoy the beauty of nature. Also, I found a birch tree, just like the ones in my homeland. I leaned against it and gave vent to my sorrow.

The meadows were scattered among aspen and alder tree groves. When rain soaked the hay, someone had to go and spread it out to dry. I liked doing that. One day I got a fright when I came upon a female bear that was basking on a sunny bank with her two cubs. At sunset I would often sing. That helped me to keep up my spirits and rise above the daily brutality emotionally unscathed.

By the end of August, many haystacks were already standing in the higher meadows as well as the lower ones near the arm of the river, where only some spots became waterlogged. Briar

bushes were laden with rosehips. Bunches of ashberries were turning red. We were supposed to return to the camp at the beginning of September. Bread was not going to be issued for the first ten days of that month.

Then disaster struck. During the night of 1 September, there were continuous heavy downpours of rain that didn't stop until midday, 3 September. Apparently it had rained like that in a wide area along the river, a region of high mountains. With a sense of foreboding we watched the arm of the river and the meadow turning into a large lake. Some haystacks were under water, others were floating away. Water was approaching the hillock where our dugout was. We rushed to pick the rosehips and ashberries from the still accessible bushes because our food supplies had run out. There was no news from «central office». The water level kept on rising, water was already soaking up around the dugout hollow and threatening to cut us off from a patch of ground with a tall aspen and other trees. We realised that we shouldn't spend the night in the dugout, but move closer to the tree, which was tall and had a lot of branches.

I was appointed to measure the water level. It continued to rise. We loaded our belongings into the cart, hitched the horse to it and settled ourselves near the tree. Everyone had eaten only ashberries and rosehips.

I saw Trofim sharpening a knife. «What are you doing?» I asked.

«The horse will have to be slaughtered and the meat cooked while there is still a dry spot to make a fire on,» he answered.

Olga and I cried out in protest, three women took his side. The brigade leader was silent. I tried to persuade her in all sorts of ways that she might have to answer for her hasty decision. Finally

she decided against slaughtering the animal. We agreed that there was enough fruit for about three days, and if the water level did not drop, we would eat raw meat.

The water was gradually approaching the tree. The dread-filled minutes ticked by. The cart was already standing in water. I stuck the measuring stick in the ground. We all climbed up into the tree. Our black horse was tied to the tree. It was hard to see what was below as it had grown dark. We clung on to the branches. Time passed ever so slowly. It was getting colder, the moon came out. It still seemed to be dry around the tree-trunk, but the horse was stamping its hind legs on wet ground. Trofim called us fools.

At long last dawn broke. I was delighted to see the measuring stick ringed with ice where the dark water mark had been. So the water level had started to drop. However, there was still a lot of hardship ahead, for we had no food and were cut off from our base.

Little by little the water receded and we returned to the dugout in the afternoon. Ashberries helped to stave off hunger. This continued the next day. It wasn't until the day after that we heard the whirr of a motorboat. Three men from the camp, the foremen, brought us bread, barley, some kind of fat and sugar. They ordered us to stay put, and turn over and dry the haystacks that hadn't floated away. The sovkhos village and a section of the camp had also been flooded.

The weather was good, but the work was hard and unpleasant. We were also cold at night. At mealtimes not much food was on the table, and just ashberries as extra rations.

The eventful season ended. Other groups had experienced similar misfortunes, but there were no casualties. At the end of September we were taken back to the camp. All the political

prisoners who had been sentenced under clauses number 58ab had been transferred to special purpose prisons. That was very depressing.

After that I worked in a fishing brigade. From round, deep, wooden tanks I had to remove salted salmon weighing between three and five kilos each, and also a smaller type of fish. The boats used to come in at high tide. They were loaded at low tide and when the tide was high, they would go back. There were no mechanical devices, all we had was a wheelbarrow. The work was not easy, and in the draughty conditions our hands became rough and chapped. After only a month the work finished, because towards the end of October the river froze over and shipping ceased.

I had another stroke of luck. I was employed in a net-making workshop that was in the same area as the fish-processing plant. I spent the winter in a warm room and I wasn't quite as hungry. Occasionally you could buy some seal meat by foregoing the bread ration. The brigade leader was a kind man, who had himself served out a sentence. Now and then he got a salted salmon or two. At night the convoy guard would take us back to the camp.

Nevertheless an awful uncertainty caused me distress, for I had a frightening dream in March 1949. I sent my mother a telegram, but received a note from the post office saying «addressee departed, address unknown». I felt torn apart with anxiety and apprehension. How were my children? The river was still frozen, there was no transport or mail. Dog sleds were no longer taking mail to Magadan. It was a dreadful time of not knowing and a premonition of bad news.

The ice on the river broke up, summer began. The supervisor of the weavers' workshop was also the supply manager of the fishing operation. One day he asked me to follow him to the river,

which was fairly wide, and pointed out a small grey hut on the opposite side. It was the fishermen's bath-house. Would I have the courage to live there by myself, he asked. It was surrounded by streams and arms of the river, and the sovkhos fields were accessible only on one side at low tide, My guards would be 20 dogs, which I had to feed and look after. I would have to make sure there was enough hot water to have a sauna bath on the last three days of each week. To get there, the fishermen would go in their own boats, but the local inhabitants would be taken there. The latter would be charged 3 roubles, which was to be handed in to the accounts clerk. An honest, serious person was needed for this job. I would get a helper on bath days, but she would have to stay in the camp.

I was astonished, but at the same time tempted by this Robinson Crusoe option. Although a little apprehensive, I accepted. The following morning I left the camp with some dry rations and my meagre possessions. The supervisor himself took me to my new job in a boat. My subordinates greeted me with loud barking. He explained my duties and asked me to take him back in the boat. It didn't take me long to learn to row. I returned without feeling afraid. I made a huge pot of gruel with seal meat and salted fish, and fed the dogs, who were tied to old, overturned boats. «The way to a man's heart is through the stomach», in this case a dog's, and by evening we were friends.

On Thursday morning my helper, Zenta Tornis, a Latvian, arrived. We sawed and chopped firewood, brought water from the river and heated the bath-house. It was, of course, hard work, but we were glad to feel partly free.

The big salmon spawning season began. Boats full of fish pulled up at the jetty one after another. As the tide came in, the

boat would tilt slightly and the fish would spill out. At low tide this silvery wealth was exposed to view in the shallow water. It was my job to collect it in my boat, feed the dogs with it and salt it in barrels for winter. Sometimes in the early hours of the morning I would fill the boat just about to the brim. The fish smelled delicious while it was cooking. The dogs gained weight and looked beautiful. I became very fond of them. When I got into my boat, they would become very excited, and some of them would even break loose from the chain. Ever faithful, they would swim beside the boat and guard it while I went about my business.

At the beginning of July I received a letter from my mother and daughter. Together with several related families, they were in a village near Kozhevnikovo in the Tomsk region. The children had been gravely ill with measles they had caught in a filtration camp, but had recovered and were now well. They were exchanging the clothes they had taken with them for food, but hoping to get some potatoes in autumn. An uncle, an old teacher and also deported, was helping them build a dugout. Another uncle, who was working as a tractor driver, had promised to help out with some flour in autumn. My nine and thirteen-year-old children were working in tobacco fields and were the only wage earners.

My heart was breaking. How could I help? I sat on the river bank in utter misery. I couldn't weep, my eyes were dry. Suddenly a moist muzzle touched my hand and started licking it. The most vicious dog had torn loose from its chain and was now licking my hands and looking into my grief-stricken eyes. At that moment something snapped inside me and I gave vent to my sorrow. With my head on my lap, I let the tears of anguish flow. A softly whimpering nose touched my cheek and bade me to go home...

I couldn't sleep that night and, without meaning to, made up a short poem, which I still remember.

*Mother, dearest, we are still alive.
Though hardship is our lot.
In a dugout near Tomsk we now dwell.
It's summer here and the sun shines warm.
Grandma is baking bread next door.
Not enough, alas, to fill our need.
Potatoes are already growing in the garden,
But gone is our precious hand-woven rug.*

July 1949

By doing without most of my bread ration and selling it all summer, I got some money and could help my family at least to some extent.

THE FOURTH NOTEBOOK

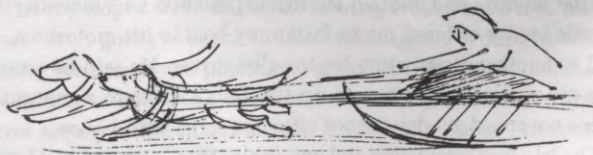
I looked after my four-legged friends with pleasure and commitment, and made sure there was enough food for winter. Occasionally at night, during times of very high tide, I felt a little apprehensive. When the wind was strong, waves would sometimes splash against the bath-house walls. At low tide the water was far away. If a latecomer's boat approached the hut, my large group of guards gave a mighty concert.

On the three bath days Zenta and I were very busy, both heating the water and ferrying people. But in the silence of the dark night my heart ached for my children and Mother.

In September I also went through a difficult time – I had a nasty boil on the middle finger of my right hand, which even

affected the bone. Because it wouldn't heal and was very sore and festered, the staff at the first-aid centre wanted to amputate the finger, but I refused to let them. I remembered hearing as a child that a dog can heal all its wounds. I decided to turn to my canine «medics» for help. And in fact I succeeded in saving my finger, thanks to the gentle tongue of the most ferocious but competent wound licker. I was soon well.

The cold set in and snow fell at the end of October. Ice covered the river. The season of hard work began for my «subjects». An expert arrived to set up dog sleds. I had to help with getting the dogs used to pulling the sleds, a skill forgotten during the summer. It was amazing how fast the dogs ran and how well the leaders of



A dog sled.

the pack understood commands. We would travel on the river ice as far as the sea, where the local people hunted seals and fished, and once a month mail was delivered to Magadan. It was, however, impossible to live in the small room of the bath-house during the winter chill. I had to go back to the camp. I handed over the feeding of the dogs to the driver. But the bath was still used, and we went to heat it on two days a week. The rest of the week was spent working in the weavers' workshop.

The following summer I lived in the bath-house again and did the same kind of work. There was some kind of concession for labour a prisoner did without breaking rules within the period of a sentence. I could hope for a reduction of about seven months. And so the summer went by without any spectacular incidents, but I felt a strange disquiet as I waited for freedom. In the meantime I sent the children as much help as possible.

The first of September brought another natural disaster. This time it was a knee-deep snowfall. Potatoes and cabbages had to be harvested by digging away snow. Our hands froze, but we managed to bring in everything because everyone was asked to help. The bath still had to be heated, so on weekends I didn't have to go out on the fields. There were frosts at night, but the days, though cool, were beautiful and sunny.

That month I had another strange experience. One morning the brigade leader ordered me to fasten my boat to his motorboat, as well as another, empty one for the sled driver. He said he would take me about 15 kilometres up the Tauya River to a saw-mill, where we could get dry timber off-cuts for the bath-house.

The trip was interesting and enjoyable. There were several beautiful, high, rocky mountains along the way, covered with snow. On one slope we encountered a magical sight of mountain ash laden with red berries, birch trees turning gold and clusters of dark green northern pines. And all this wealth against a background of snow! There were several such mountain sides of spectacular scenery.

The dry off-cuts were very useful for starting the fire in the bath-house and keeping it going. We loaded up the boats and set off for home in high spirits. My companion knew Tauya River and its banks very well because he fished here in summer. I travelled in front, he was behind me. At one point he told me that he wanted to

go ashore to hunt, and that he would catch up with me. So I continued alone. The current was carrying me gently and I was enjoying the beautiful scenery. I didn't notice that another wide current had appeared next to me, and that it was swiftly taking me in the wrong direction. It was impossible to turn the boat. I noticed that at the foot of the high mountain the currents joined again. I was going in that direction, when without warning the boat hit the shallows.

It was beginning to get dark, but my companion was nowhere in sight. I was worried – would he be able to spot me so far away? Should I dump the much needed cargo into the water? Would that help? I sat there, on a large expanse of water, desperate and not knowing what to do. Suddenly I caught sight of my companion, the hoped-for saviour. I yelled, waved my scarf, but there was no response. He kept going fast.

All my hopes were dashed. Nothing would save me, for the tide wasn't going to come in until midnight. I would be frozen stiff by the time it was possible to get off the shallows. In a month I would have been free, but now I was doomed to die... I would never see my children again. Who would help them? I cannot describe my emotions at that moment.

Darkness had fallen. My companion, having taken a long detour around the foot of the mountain, was approaching me from the other direction. I could barely see him, but I could hear the oars splashing. He wasn't able to draw near me, but told me to get into the water and push the boat, and gave me the directions that would take me past the shallows. So I took my clothes off the lower half of my body and jumped into the ice-cold water. I succeeded in pushing the boat off and avoiding the shallows. After thanking my companion wholeheartedly for his presence of mind and saving me from such a life-threatening situation, I happily rowed the boat

back. I did not stray one little bit from him on that cold evening. My body was tingling after the icy swim. I felt a wonderful sense of satisfaction that once again the worst had not happened.

October went by in a state of tension. I was waiting to be released, but the weather gradually grew colder and the river began freezing over. What will I do if I get my freedom when river transport stops? My worst fears were confirmed. The river froze over. I was freed on 27 October, 1950.

I said goodbye to my beloved guard dogs with an anxious, heavy heart. My work supervisor had been informed by telephone that one more small ship would leave for Magadan from the open seaport of Yana. But Yana was 35 kilometres away. Fortunately another person, a Russian girl, also wanted to go to Magadan. She had been freed on the same day.

I was paid a small sum of money for the four years of labour. A woman prisoner offered to sell me an autumn coat. It fitted me and I could afford it. It restored my self-esteem somewhat, as now I didn't need to wear the usual padded jacket. Some money was left over for necessities.

The next morning we set off for a new life as free people. That wasn't going to be easy. There was no way we could cross the sea and reach Tomsk without money. The first opportunity to join the ranks of human beings would be in Magadan. We trudged on, no-one happened to drive past. The road took us through wooded country with newly-built, as yet uninhabited houses. However, yourts were pitched in front, out of which rose wisps of smoke.

It was dark by the time we arrived in the Yana village. Dead tired from the long walk, we were relieved to find a family that welcomed us and allowed us to stay. We found out that a ship bound for Magadan had in fact been delayed here.

A fierce storm blew in during the night. The sea roared and tossed up waves as high as a house. I have never seen anything like it. It was impossible to make your way around the village without holding onto something. The storm raged for five days and the temperature dropped. The seamen became nervous. They didn't want to take us because of the risk of having passengers on board, yet they couldn't wait for the sea to become completely calm. Fortunately the coxswain had been in Rīga and had a good impression of Latvians. He wanted to help me and so he persuaded the captain to take me.

When we sailed out into the open sea, the waves were still huge. Tables and chairs were tossed around like matchboxes. The coxswain kindly allowed us to use his cabin, because he knew we would suffer from seasickness. It was, in fact, indescribable agony – we were sick to the point of fainting. But we arrived safely in Magadan. We had survived.

A BRIEF SUMMARY OF SUBSEQUENT EVENTS

On 1 December 1950, I began working as the chief waitress in a cafeteria in Magadan. Because there was opportunity to work overtime, I was able to help my family in Siberia. In spring I signed an agreement to continue working in Magadan and in this way ensured a better future for my children.

In the summer of 1955 my children arrived by plane in Magadan. My daughter was in the ninth, my son in the sixth grade.

In 1962 my daughter graduated from a Leningrad institute. My son was studying at the Achinska School of Military Aviation. I went back to my homeland. My mother and her other daughter's family had already returned.

Another common way of stating the result is to say that the
 total number of ways to choose k objects from n objects is
 the same as the number of ways to choose $n-k$ objects from
 n objects. This is because for every subset of k objects,
 there is a unique complementary subset of $n-k$ objects.

The binomial theorem states that for any real numbers x and y ,
 and any non-negative integer n ,

$$(x+y)^n = \sum_{k=0}^n \binom{n}{k} x^k y^{n-k}$$

where $\binom{n}{k}$ is the binomial coefficient. This theorem can be
 proved using the binomial theorem itself, or by using the
 combinatorial interpretation of the binomial coefficients.

The binomial coefficients are also related to the Pascal's
 triangle, which is a triangular array of numbers. Each entry
 in the triangle is the sum of the two entries directly above
 it. The entries in the n th row of the triangle are the
 binomial coefficients $\binom{n}{0}, \binom{n}{1}, \dots, \binom{n}{n}$.

The binomial theorem and the binomial coefficients are
 fundamental tools in combinatorics and algebra. They are
 used to expand powers of binomials, to count the number of
 ways to choose objects, and to prove various identities.

EXCERPT FROM
«THE ABYSS OF SUFFERING»

Melānija Vanaga

1941. THE FIRST VICTIMS

Deportation from her homeland and the realisation of her helplessness had cast a dark shadow over Mrs Jēkabsons' mind. She began to suffer from unbearable feelings of anxiety. What was going to happen to her and her children? Would they meet with the same fate as her husband? She was in mental anguish about the fate of her children.

In the evening she thought she could hear the guards talking about blowing up our train or suffocating us with poison gas. She even heard holes for the gas being drilled into the carriage wall. We told her it wasn't true, but we couldn't persuade her that she was having a nightmare. The rest of us women weren't in such good state, either.

Mrs Jēkabsons had brought a lot of packages with her, containing provisions and clothes to last for quite some time. That evening she was again rummaging through them, looking for something. She searched for a long time. We fell asleep.

The train had passed through Disova, Drisa, and Velikiye Luki, where the rivers Daugava and Volga rise. We were approaching Msta station.

At dawn on 20 June, Mrs Jēkabsons lost her reason. The mother took the lives of her three small children and then her own. With a soft thud, a bloodstained razor fell to the floor.

Vilma K. was sleeping next to the unfortunate woman. She woke up when she felt a sudden movement beside her and a warm moisture on her side. On seeing what was happening, Vilma grabbed her sleeping child and, horrified, leapt up onto our bunk.

«Save your children, save them!» she cried. «The mad woman is going to kill them all!»

By the time Grandfather Jēkabsons got to his feet, it was too late.

We banged on the door and the window as hard as we could. Finally the train stopped and two guards entered. Then a third with a sheet of paper in his hand. He interrogated the eyewitnesses, stepping aside carefully as the dark stream of blood, fading away with the lives of four human beings, flowed close to his feet.

The cattle wagon doors were opened wide for once, but not for the living to step out. No, they were opened so that the dead could be carried out. Tied up in two bundles of bloodstained sheets, an entire Latvian family, a part of the nation's body, was lifted out by the guards. A shallow pit was dug at the edge of the forest, the bundles were thrown in and the pit was filled in. The mother was taken away somewhere, as she was thought to be still alive.

Morning dawned cheerfully to greet the funeral procession. But she soon paused and blushed. She was late. Perhaps this would not have happened if she hadn't been. But let Morning not blame herself for bringing the Sun so late. No ray of sunshine would now have been able to find the Jēkabsons' blood-soaked bunk. For many days the tragic mother hadn't seen any light, let alone sunshine. Her corner had always been dark and gloomy.

Excerpt from «The Abyss of Suffering»

The grave-diggers rinsed their hands in a ditch and brought us a bucketful of water for washing the carriage. The mothers were warned that their children would be taken from them if anything else happened. The train continued on its journey.

The children were now beside themselves with fear. They were afraid of being taken away.

«Mummy, don't let them take me! Don't give me away!» they all begged one after another.

My son Alnis whispered, «Whatever happens, don't give me away. What will I do, all alone?»

No adult would now believe how those children implored their mothers. And my hand refuses to write it down, even what Alnis said.

His hand trembling, Grandfather Jēkabsons wrote the names of his grandchildren in his little pocketbook: «Andris J., Gunārs J., Aigars J. 20.6.1941, Msta station.» He drew a small cross beside each name and asked us all to sign.

...the first thing I did was to go to the bank and get some money out of the safe. I was a bit nervous, but I had to do it. I had to get some money out of the safe. I was a bit nervous, but I had to do it.

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The cattle were all dead, and the sheep were all dead. The living to die out. No, they were not dead, but they could be carried out. Tied up in two bundles of hay, they were carried out. Tied up in two bundles of hay, they were carried out. Tied up in two bundles of hay, they were carried out.

...the first thing I did was to go to the bank and get some money out of the safe. I was a bit nervous, but I had to do it. I had to get some money out of the safe. I was a bit nervous, but I had to do it.

BALLAD OF SOULS IN TORMENT

Jānis Zīle

Vorkuta.

The hour of midnight.

Blizzards of snow scream over the tundra.

The northern lights rise like phantoms in the sky

White shadows of the dead dance in the snow –

Souls laid to rest without a blessing.

Just bare bones –

Without eyes,

Without names.

Mothered to life

But condemned to die

By tyranny.

 The crack of a shot from a guard's tower.

 The crack of a retort from the next.

 The guards test each other's vigilance.

Vorkuta.

The ground is damned.

But the ground is not to blame.

Guilty is the mind

That devised this.

The twisted mind
Of the tyrant,
Who twirls his moustache.

The crack of a shot from a guard's tower
The crack of a retort from the next.

The guards test each other's vigilance.

This is the twentieth century.
Gas chambers in Buchenwald.
Vorkuta and Norilsk in Russia.

It's no surprise
That so many bones dance
Over the Vorkuta tundra
At the hour of midnight.
Their dance of death,
Their dance of rebirth,
Their dance of accusation,
In defiance of the tyrant
And his lackeys.

The air vents moan in the shafts.
Countless blood-thirsting wolves,
Armed with bullets and hate,
Rattle their teeth in guard towers:
– The souls must be captured,
Every single one,
The prints of guilt erased,
Or we'll have to answer.

The crack of a shot from a guard's tower
The crack of a retort from the next.
The guards test each other's vigilance.

Ballad of Souls In Torment

The souls pass arm in arm.
Souls of many nations arm in arm.
A-1, A-2 and up to a thousand,
And up to the last Cyrillic letter
All accuse the tyrant
Who has taken their lives.
 The crack of a shot from a guard's tower
 The crack of a retort from the next.
 The guards test each other's vigilance.
For vigilance is needed –
Time and time again a hand
Rises up from the ground
To sweep at midnight over the tundra,
And throw snow at the eyes of the guards,
For the still living to make an escape
From this land of the damned,
Spattered with the blood of innocence.
Back home to their land,
Back home to their mothers' arms.
– Mother, don't cry,
See, I have returned,
But as a shadow, alas.
My life I left on Russian soil,
And my flesh?
Flesh I had no longer.
Just bare bones.
Bury me now,
The soul of your son,
Lay me to rest at home.

The crack of a shot from a guard's tower.
The crack of a retort from the next.
The guards test each other's vigilance.

Dying...
Dying holds no horror.
Horror belongs to the starving,
Who know there's one who eats,
Stuffing his mouth with food
Warmed on coals from Vorkuta,
And raising a glass to sing,
– Stalin, the guiding light of our lives.

The ground whirls up to the sky.
On blizzard nights the convoy's bullets are speedy.
The teeth of the dogs razor sharp.
Many meet death on nights like these.
Those with power and might will continue
To gamble away human lives
As if the number of the already dead
Was too small.
And it all takes place in full view of the world.
– But we did not know, – posterity will say.
– You were so far away from the rest of the world.
And that will be the excuse.

The crack of a shot from a guard's tower.
The crack of a retort from the next.
The guards test each other's vigilance.
Barracks crouched in the snow,
With black smoking chimneys.
Numbered clothes on hooks

Ballad of Souls In Torment

Swing in the breath of the sleepers.
Searchlight fingers grope at the barbed wire.
A frost-bitten dog howls in the dark.
Someone will soon die.

You that have passed into eternity,
You that are blessed by Fortune,
What do you tell the Creator
About the world He has created,
About those created in love,
That wrought life on earth
To a living hell?

The crack of a shot from a guard's tower.

The crack of a retort from the next.

The guards test each other's vigilance.

The dead are a myriad.

The tundra is thick with their bones.

Omnipotent Russia, your land is damned.

Where is your conscience,

Your honour and righteousness?

You have soaked your snow with blood

And turned life itself into a burden.

Omnipotent Russia...

The souls of the dead dance.

The living damn their birth,

Damn their mothers for giving them life.

But is the mother to blame?

Perhaps only the one

Who brought him who lacks all human feeling

Into the world,
For other mothers to weep
Over their children's maimed and broken bodies.
 The crack of a shot from a guard's tower.
 The crack of a retort from the next.
 The guards test each other's vigilance.

The hour of midnight.
Changing of the guard in the towers.
Feet wrapped in strips of felt
Tread the snow in silence.
Wolverine steps,
Wolverine instincts.
Eyes follow the line of fences,
Gun barrels twitch.
Satan's night!
White shadows of the dead dance in the blizzard.
In the shafts the air vents howl
You can lose your mind!
Eyes follow the line of fences:
– Is no-one going to try to escape?
Death will rest tonight.
The night is red,
And red must be the snow
To bring the soul to rest.

The splutter of a shot.
A break in the snowstorm.
Stars can be glimpsed
And a mighty cross of the northern lights.

Ballad of Souls In Torment

A guard dog wails,

Scenting blood.

Let Him be praised!

Death...

The crack of a shot from a guard's tower.

The crack of a retort from the next.

The guards test each other's vigilance.

Vorkuta.

The hour of midnight.

Winds wail through barbed wire.

Arctic lights stain the snow red.

Watchdogs bark,

Guards swear.

The living return from their shift in the shafts.

Numbered on each left leg.

Numbered on each left arm.

Numbered on each back.

Numbered on each cap.

They walk slowly,

Like those that have been brushed by death.

This is the twentieth century.

It's beyond comprehension.

They pass the guardhouse.

And disperse within barbed-wire Gulags.

The snowstorms again.

The tormented souls of the dead

Race over the tundra again.

A mass of human souls

Tortured in cells,
Shot beside fences.
Enslaved in mines.

And so night after night.
Year after year.
Without peace
Without rest.
Without the sign of the cross.

Bare your head
If you go out on the Vorkuta tundra.
You, the living, you step on the bones of the dead.

Vorkuta, winter 1950/51

WE SANG THROUGH TEARS

Herta Kaļiņina

I was born near Liepāja on 10 September, 1925. There were four children in our family, three daughters and one son.

On completing primary school in 1940, I enrolled at the Liepāja Art High School. On 14 June, 1941 we were deported. In 1947 my brother and I returned home by the last steamboat.

On 1 October, 1950 I was arrested again and sent to various prisons, the last of which was in Krasnoyarsk. I ended up in Yeniseysk, where I was told to continue the journey at my own expense. As I had no money, I stayed there and was assigned to work first in a kiosk, then as a waitress.

In 1953 I married a geologist and began a course to gain qualifications as a laboratory assistant.

Our son was born in 1955. In 1956 we moved to the Altai region in Central Asia, where, in 1957, our daughter was born. In 1959 we returned to our homeland.

13 June, 1941. A beautiful, sunny day. We were all working in the sugarbeet fields. After lunch Mr Sausais, the deputy of the militia, came to see my father. He called him aside, said something, and Father went home.

In the evening our parents joined in with us in all kinds of games. Young people had come from the homesteads nearby, we played games and ran around, breaking branches and flattening the grass. Our parents, however, didn't complain, not even about the roses, which Father grafted himself and looked after carefully. We were living in a country home, in a part of what had once been a German baron's estate. That evening Father didn't send us off to bed. It must have been terrible to know that you will be arrested.

The morning of 14 June, about 5 o'clock. Everyone was woken up by a loud knocking on the door. Accompanied by soldiers, a Russian man and a rather distant neighbour of ours barged into the room. They ordered us to pack as many things as we could carry and said we had to go and live somewhere else. The Russian kept pestering my mother for gold valuables. She told him to search for them. He wanted to take off her wedding ring but couldn't. Everyone was put into a truck. The soldier used force to pull my mother away from the doorpost, to which she was clinging and screaming, «My precious cows, who is going to look after you now?» As if hearing my mother's voice, the cows mooed in the cowshed. It was milking time.

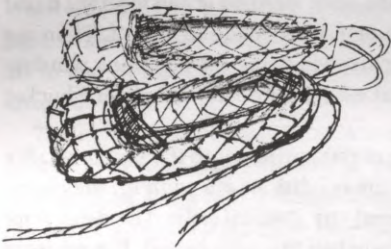
As the truck drove out of the yard, Father's favourite stud stallion, which was grazing on the hill, started to run around in circles and neigh. That's when Father couldn't hold back his tears any longer. He then told us that the day before, the deputy of the militia had warned him and advised him to escape. When Father had asked him what he had done to hurt anyone, the answer had been, «You are a class enemy and we are going to annihilate the likes of you.»

We Sang Through Tears

We travelled under military guard. After four kilometres the vehicle stopped, and in this homestead too we could hear screams and crying. We were taken to Priekule, where cattle wagons with bars, double bunks and weeping people were waiting. Children were sitting on the top bunks. All day long more people were brought in. At night the train stopped at the military naval base in Liepāja, where the men were made to get off. Then we stopped in Jelgava for 24 hours, where the thread on the window bars was smashed to prevent escape, and we were given a bucket of water.

Such was the beginning of our journey into the unknown. It's painful to even talk about the conditions we were in, they were so appalling. No-one received any medical help. The dead were buried by the railroad tracks when the train halted. For we were nobody. A name on the list was simply crossed out. Somewhere deep in Russia we were given some millet porridge, which smelt of garlic. Finally the journey was over. We were taken off the train and dumped in mud and rain in Krasnoyarsk. The people who had small children were taken to some kind of building, probably a school. The rest settled nearby in a structure that is hard to describe – there was a roof, but no walls. That was where we lived. To reach this dwelling, we had to wade through almost knee-deep mud. Next, we were assigned to villages. Four families, including ours, were taken to the kolkhoz «The Big Salmon» in the Pirovsk region. The village consisted of eight to ten homes. It was very poor. We were shown to an empty hut without a roof on the bank of a river. The only valuable things in the hut were bedbugs and cockroaches. Only a few villagers could read and write. They were very shabbily dressed and wore jute sandals, never having seen a shoe in their lives. We were

ordered to cut corn with a sickle. Threshing was done with a flail. As soon as we sat down, we would grind grains of corn, put them in our pockets or eat them as they were. We also ate the tubers of



Jute sandals.

for food. The Tatars always fed us and even gave us crusts of bread to take with us. We had made a set of scales to weigh out bread in equal portions for everyone. All the mothers gave half of their share to their children. Mosquitoes and midges, tiny flies with a fierce bite which bled immediately, bit us mercilessly, leaving us swollen and with festering skin lesions.

The following families lived in the kolkhoz: our mother and her four children, me being the eldest (15 years) and my brother the youngest (8 years); Mrs Toms and her four children (the eldest of whom was 13, the youngest 4 years old); then there was Ella Petrovskis, their sister-in-law with her son. These two women spoke a little Russian. The villagers' treatment of us varied. If anyone received news of the death of a husband or a brother, they treated us with hostility, for in their eyes we were fascists. One

wild lilies and ramson, which is a wild garlic with leaves like those of the lily of the valley. We steamed grain, dried it and ground it with a stone. The kolkhoz gave us nothing, so we were forced to steal. We used to go to the Tatar kolkhozes which were prosperous, to exchange clothes

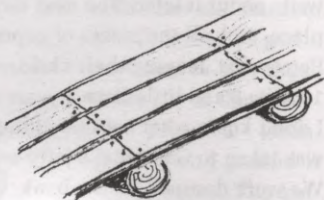
We Sang Through Tears

day, while Mrs Toms was writing in her diary, a Russian woman came in. When asked what she was writing, Mrs Toms answered that she was recording what it was like here so that she could write about it later. The next day some militiamen arrived at her place, took all the pieces of paper and arrested Mrs Toms and Mrs Petrovskis, leaving their children behind. Uldis was 13, Gunārs 10, Rita 8 and little Dace 4 years old. Mrs Petrovskis' Juris was 12. I don't know what became of these children. In spring our family was taken to Galanina, a jetty on the banks of the Yenisey River. We were dumped on the bank, where there were already a lot of people. We stayed there for a number of weeks, exposed to the sun, wind and rain, eaten alive by mosquitoes and midges and again suffering from festering sores.

When the ship «Maria Ulyanova» arrived, we were all put on it, on the decks. Passengers travelled in cabins. The journey took several days, after which we had to go ashore in Yeniseysk because the people who were taking us had disappeared with all the documents and ration cards. In Yeniseysk we stayed in a timber mill. We were assigned to work at the mill, which was very hard. The following incident took place there. The prisoners were working under the supervision of convoy guards. One day the guards started to beat and kick one of the prisoners. Then the unfortunate man's shirt was torn off his back, he was tied to a post, doused with water and left to the mosquitoes and those loathsome midges, which crawl into one's eyes, nose, corners of the mouth and ears, and draw blood wherever they bite. When the man lost consciousness, he was dragged by the arms to the river and thrown in. After he had been pulled out and had regained consciousness, he was again put to work. In the towns in the north, as well as in timber mills, all the streets were covered with

timber planks. The state of this man's back after he had been dragged over such a surface was beyond description.

Our journey continued on the open deck of a ship. We travelled north for several weeks. Then small groups of families were put ashore at various settlements. At Igarka adult males were left to work at the shipyard there. Several families, including ours, were taken to Sushkov, an uninhabited place with two or three



A timber footpath.

fishermen's huts. It was located near a large river and surrounded by forests. There was a brand-new, empty barrack with eight rooms, double bunks and a corridor. Between the bunks in each

room was a cast-iron stove. The rooms had no doors, there was just one main entrance. There was also a bakery, a shop and an engineer's house, all new, and all built specially for the deportees. To heat the rooms, we brought wood from the forest. Our hard labour with a 12 to 14 hour working day began here. In this part of the world the sun doesn't set in summer, on reaching the horizon it just rises again. We had to cut hay, fish and saw wood.



A cast-iron stove.

We Sang Through Tears

Although too arduous for us, fishing in summer was more or less bearable. Those who worked were given 800 g of bread, a little butter, sugar, 2 kg of salted fish and some groats. Bread was issued in such small quantities at a time and it was so underdone, that sometimes there was nothing to eat, all you could do was take the handful home, put it in water and make a gruel, just water with flour added. The punishment for the slightest transgression, failure to fulfill the work quota or a retort, was a reduction or even withdrawal of the bread ration.

At the onset of autumn we had to cut firewood in the forest. The snow was deep, we didn't know how to use a saw, it would buckle, get stuck and we would lose control of it. Countless people were killed. Then we were shown how to fell a tree. We were hardly able to meet the quotas. Winter days were dark, and we were cold in our threadbare clothes and with nothing but rags on our feet. In summer we had secretly cut off some pieces from fishing ropes and unravelled them. A crochet hook was filed from a five-centimetre nail. We crocheted slippers into which we put moss and rags, and that was how we walked around. In later years, boots of sorts, consisting of wooden soles and canvas uppers, were issued for work in the forest in 40 to 50 degree subzero temperatures. Later still, lace-up boots were sent from America, they at least were made of leather.

For lunch we had a frozen, one centimetre thick slice of bread, which we ate with snow. I remember how, in order to meet the quota, we cut down a larch, about 80 centimetres in diameter. We all helped to get it out of the snow and stack it, but the two metre logs refused to budge. Finally, with great difficulty we managed to put them in one pile. We were wiser after that.

When we returned from the forest, each person would carry three or four pieces of sawn-up firewood to burn at night and dry our wet clothes. In winter the cut firewood was transported to the river bank. When the barge arrived to collect it, the women had to load it on. This involved pushing the wood down a steep bank and then carrying it along planks. It took four or five people to roll some of the logs. Meanwhile the men who were on the boat laughed at us as we worked, half-starved.

In summer we had to fish with large nets. There were two teams, but I don't remember how many people in each. The leaders were Druzhinin and Shalguyev, the latter a real monster, who tormented us in all sorts of ways. When we fished with Druzhinin, however, we would cook a bucketful of fish as soon as we caught some. He himself would help with the work. But Shalguyev, heaven help us, wasn't content with just tormenting us and harassing us, he swore at us as well, using the foulest language and telling us to drop dead, as there were 200 more fascists on the other side of the river. One day in autumn we were fishing in the first shift. Workboots had already been issued. We put them on in the morning. But the shift hadn't finished when Shalguyev sent out the second shift. We had to take off the boots when we finished working. Wet and barefoot, we had to run home, four kilometres away, over frozen ground. I ran a short distance, sat down, rubbed the soles of my feet with tears and saliva, continued running, after a while repeated the process, peeing to warm them and running again. Frozen ground has the same effect as red-hot iron. How my feet hurt afterwards! After this incident we used to take those slippers of ours with us.

We were often searched to make sure we didn't take any fish. We did, but we hid them in bushes near home, or someone would

come to meet us. If that wasn't possible, we'd go to get the fish later at night.

In winter we were sent to fish on the lakes. First horses, then further on, reindeer were used to transport the nets. We carried our loads on our backs. Weighed down like this, we struggled forward, tamping down the snow, which was waist-high. When we reached the shore of the lake, we had to clear an area of snow, put up a tent, saw some timber for bunks, cover the tent with snow, set up and light the small stove and break off some fir tree branches to sleep on. Only then could we have a rest. We slept fully clothed at night, in the mornings your head would be frozen to the tent. On our return from fishing in the evening, we were wet, the tent was cold and it would take a while to light the stove and hang up the wet clothes and felt boots. After eating a small piece of bread and a frozen fish, we had to go to sleep in these steamy conditions.

When there were no more fish in a lake, we moved to another one. I nearly drowned in one. Bruhanov, the engineer in charge, was a decent man, who treated us like human beings by giving us fish to cook, for example. One day Mrs Šlemers and I were told to check the hooks. On our way a snowstorm blew in, and it was no longer possible to see the track that had been marked out. In the middle of the lake there was a very deep whirlpool, which never froze over. Somehow I instinctively stepped aside a couple of metres on my skis. After continuing for a few metres, I felt my skis slowly sinking. I managed to fall backwards. Mrs Šlemers rushed up to me and pulled me out. When, on all fours and on one ski, I had extricated myself, I sat down and started to cry. Home was ten kilometres away, night was approaching, the snow was deep, I had one ski and Mrs Šlemers could only help me as best she could.

When we reached home, I had ice all over me. The top layer of clothes was taken off, but my legs up to the knees were frozen into the felt boots. I stood on the cast-iron stove to thaw them out, but when the ice began to melt, I screamed with unbearable pain. Bruhanov then gave me some alcohol to drink and some hot tea to wash it down. I don't know what happened after that. Apparently he had ordered that my feet be rubbed with alcohol and covered warmly, and that I was to drink more alcohol when I awoke. Miraculously I got neither a fever nor a cold as a result.

When the fishing on lakes ended, we returned to Sushkov, where we continued to fish through holes in the ice. The ice was more than a metre thick, the weather was bitter, our hands were raw and swollen, the wind was freezing and our clothes were threadbare. We went off to work in darkness and returned in darkness. In the north, winter days are dark. The only beautiful thing was the northern lights, *Aurora borealis*, so bright that it was almost possible to read by them.

When the winter fishing season ended, we had to saw up birchtree logs, which were used to warm aircraft. First the bark had to be stripped off, then the log had to be sawn and chopped into five-centimetre long pieces. The quota was one cubic metre. Just try not filling it – you lost your bread ration. In 1944 we were ordered to clear forests, fell trees and cut down bushes, struggle with roots and prepare fields for potatoes. We dug a large pit on a hill and, using spades and yokes, carried the soil away. At night fires were lit over the entire site to allow the ground to thaw, for below 50 to 80 centimetres it was permanently frozen. A cellar was built here. Potatoes which were brought in on the last ship had to be carried on our backs into this cellar. We took some secretly and hid them, for we hadn't eaten any since 1942. During

these years our double bunks had become vacant. People had passed away, frozen to death or drowned on fishing expeditions. Entire families perished. On that same hill with the cellar there is a Latvian cemetery, where my sister Vera is buried. On one occasion in spring during a regular check, a militiaman, muffled up in fur coats, yelled for someone to go in the direction of Karasina where, about one kilometre away, a corpse was sitting. They reached the boy too late, for he had already frozen to death. When Mrs Freibergs saw the body of her second son, she wasn't quite normal after that and died some time later.

When spring came, flocks of white sparrows would fly above us. My brother snared them. They were very fatty and were a significant addition to our diet. Mother even sold a few of them, as well as some partridges. We never had enough money to supplement the value of our ration cards, especially in the last years when 4 metres of cloth became available.

In 1945, while sorting potatoes, I ate a few that were still good. I got dysentery and was ill for a long time. There was no medicine. I was given an infusion of pine needles as well as rice water. When things had got so bad that I could no longer move, the supervisor came in and in a loud voice said, «Make a coffin, she won't last the night.» There I was, just 20 years old, starving, and I had to die. I wanted something to eat and then die. The next day, Mrs Dimitrijs brought me half a litre of boiled-up bilberries. I ate them all and fell asleep. When I woke up, everything was quiet. I rolled off the board on which I had been sleeping, crawled to the small box where my mother stored food, ate two tablespoonsful of butter, two birds and a few spoonsful of some kind of porridge, crept back and fell asleep. When I woke up after 24 hours, Mother, my brother and sisters were weeping, others were silent, for it is believed that a

person feels fine just before dying. I lay there, breathing normally and not moaning as before. On the following day I repeated the procedure, and so gradually I recovered. The supervisor ordered extra food rations. As I got better, my whole body, especially my legs and the soles of my feet, were covered in wounds that looked like they had been cut with razor blades. I slept on my stomach. I took cod liver oil. Little by little the wounds healed. As I was no longer able to go to large-scale fishing because of recurring spasms and diarrhoea, I was assigned to dropnet fishing. Compared to other jobs, this one was a holiday. We fished in pairs. We'd cast the net, keep the boat floating downstream and check the net after a while. This went on all day long. At times such as these, we always thought of our motherland, and our only wish was to return. It often happened that we would start singing, especially a song in which we expressed our sorrow about having to live in a foreign land and our yearning to return to our homeland, if only to be buried there. We sang through tears. We made a promise to ourselves to survive, come what may, for it couldn't get any worse.

While we were fishing one day, we caught a one metre long white salmon. We wanted to taste it so much that we decided to risk it and face the consequences. We divided the fish in half and threw the head into the river. We washed it and dried it a little in the sun so that it wouldn't have any blood on it. That evening we went ashore quite far from home. We tied one end of the fish to the waist and in several places to the leg, bunched up our already wide pants a bit more and continued on our way. Our hearts were in our mouths, of course, but everything turned out alright. Mother salted the fish and gave us slices to put on our bread.

Because the war had already ended, our living conditions improved. In Sushkov there was a new supervisor by the name of

Shadrin. Searches were not carried out any more. There was no point in searching the few people left. Shadrin always organised jobs so that someone from each family was assigned to fishing. Rations were also increased.

There was no school in Sushkov. In our group there was a Mrs Aplociņš and her daughter. Mrs Aplociņš was the founder of the Liepāja Art Secondary School. As soon as there was a free moment or it rained, she would educate us by telling us about history, literature and geography. She had travelled widely. She would later test us by way of conversation and without us being aware of it. When her husband was freed from the forced-labour camp but was not allowed to join his family, Mrs Aplociņš could not endure it any longer and hanged herself. There was also a woman by the name of Erna Jēkabsons, who always had an encouraging word for us young ones. Although she was suffering herself, she taught us to smile even at the most harrowing times. Back home she had a young daughter, for whom her heart ached because she had no news of her.

Then I developed an illness affecting my joints and was put into the Igarka hospital. When I got better, I was assigned to work in a fish-processing factory. My task was to unload fish from a boat or salt from barges. Using a yoke, I had to carry the load uphill to the factory. This went on every day for countless hours, for if a cargo of fish was brought in at the end of a shift, you still had to unload it. If a boat arrived to pick up processed fish, then barrels had to be rolled down the steep bank. That was something I'd rather forget. The large barrels containing salted fillets, a special order, were transported in horse-drawn carts. Once again I fell ill, suffering from diarrhoea, cramps and vomiting, so I was assigned to stacking boards in a timbermill.

In 1947 a rumour spread that children who had been under age at the time of deportation could return home. Many of us did. After receiving news from those who had gone back about conditions at home, Mother decided to send me and my brother by the last boat. At the end of September we went to Krasnoyarsk, where with great difficulty we obtained a ticket to Rīga. As if travelling half starved wasn't enough, we were robbed as well. We survived on the charity of others as far as Rīga, for everyone was familiar with hunger. I wept as we crossed the border. Even though it was late autumn, it was as if the grey countryside was smiling at you. For the first time in my life the sun was shining warm and bright.

My godmother, Father's sister, met me in Rīga. But after a couple of days there, we were rudely ordered by the supervisory committee of housing to leave immediately. We went to Liepāja to another aunt. There was no room for us there, either, for people were afraid to register us as residents. At that time Liepāja was a restricted area. I was terribly hungry, something that is hard to understand unless you have experienced hunger yourself. I was ashamed to eat so much. My brother and I bought a loaf of bread, went to a beach and sat down in the dunes to eat it.

Next we went to our family home, where Father's third sister was living. Everything had been destroyed in the war. My aunt and uncle had built a small cottage on the ruins. But we had no luck there, either. We were the banished people, who appeared like ghosts and brought bad memories. My brother stayed on Father's property with our aunt, but I was taken in by my mother's brother in Pērkone. It was obvious that there was no place in the sun for two human beings when they returned to their homeland, where even in November, everything had seemed so warm and welcoming. Documents were not sufficient, references were needed.

While I was living at my uncle's place, I helped with the housework. Towards spring, a childhood friend of my mother offered me a job as a secretary in the village soviet¹. And so, in the spring of 1948 I started working. I had a good command of Russian and managed alright. The supervisor could barely sign his name. I had to do all the work. However, I was not allowed to continue my education. As soon as I revealed on an application form that I had been deported, the door slammed shut.

One morning in March, 1949, I was woken by a stranger. He told me to take a pen and some paper and go with him. He took me to a farmhouse, where there was a vehicle with captured ex-Latvian army soldiers. I realised what was happening. I implored them to let me leave and started to cry. «Write down the information we require or join them,» I was ordered. The man who was in charge of the deportation was watching people suffer with real diabolical pleasure. This home, just like ours in 1941, was also looted.

Soon after that, kolkhoz farms were established and village soviets amalgamated. I got a job in a kolkhoz as a cashier and started a bookkeeping course in Liepāja. After a while I was «promoted» to the position of organiser of cultural activities, a task I performed with a degree of success.

Shortly before October Revolution Day in 1950, a man I didn't know came to visit me in the so-called «red corner»². I think he introduced himself. He asked me what I was doing, read the wall newspaper I was putting up and expressed his satisfaction. He

¹ *Soviet* – A soviet was an elected council in the Soviet Union.

² *Red corner* – usually a room or part of a room in school offices and factories where Soviet flags, photographs of heroes, memorabilia, exhortations and wall newspapers were displayed. Apart from its informative function, the red corner had a semi-sacred aura about it.

wanted to know what else I had planned, and I told him what we had decided to accomplish. He praised me for a tastefully arranged «red corner». Then he asked me to sit down and said we would go to my apartment because I had to go back to Siberia. I sat there as though turned to stone. After I had recovered from the shock, I remonstrated with him, saying that I had permission to return to Latvia. When I got home, some strangers were helping themselves to my belongings. And so, with a bag on my back, I once again left my homeland.

First I was taken to Liepāja prison. When I entered the cell, the rules and regulations applying to criminals were taken off the wall. The door banged shut and I heard someone say in Russian, «Politically dangerous element.» After a while I was fetched and taken to a room where two men were sitting, and the interrogation began, but I don't recall the questions. Some kind of tag was hung around my neck in the adjoining room, I was photographed from different angles, and then fingerprints of all my fingers were taken. All this was carried out so brutally and had such a devastating effect on me, that I could neither speak nor think.

The following evening, under guard and on a passenger train, one compartment of which had bars, I was taken to the Central Prison. There were many people there already, some babies and small children. Tears were ignored. For lunch we were given cabbage soup with maggots floating on top. And so began my second journey to Siberia, via transit prisons, of which there were six, including the ones in Liepāja and finally Krasnoyarsk. The last one was the most depressing. First of all we had to stand and freeze in the prison yard until the roll was called. You had to respond when your surname was called. I heard my brother's name also being called. There was no heating in the room where we were

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accommodated, and we slept on the bare cement floor. There was a tiny window in the ceiling. Water was dripping from the ceiling, and a smelly latrine bucket was there for general use. It was the most gruesome prison.

I spent the winter on a collective farm. In spring we were transported further away, where I met my brother. He had been arrested at work, in his dirty work clothes. He had been told that his sister was going back and that his mother had expressed the wish to have her children live with her. So we were taken to Yeniseysk and left there. We got to know all the people who had been deported for the second time. We supported and helped each other. I worked as a waitress in a canteen, at least I wasn't hungry. In 1959 I returned to my homeland, and again it was October.

Spring, 1990

THE DARK PAGES OF MY LIFE

Lidija Vilnis

In the early hours of 14 June, 1941, we were woken by the sound of a vehicle in our yard. Armed soldiers and a civilian entered the room. They told my husband to pack. We were all surprised and frightened. My husband began to get dressed. After a while I was told to get ready, too. I cheered up a little, for then I'd be with him, come what may. In my confusion I didn't know what to take with us. I put a blanket on the floor, threw all sorts of clothes on it and tied it up into a bundle. The civilian allowed me to make another bundle. We were put into a truck. My husband's parents and my mother, three old, distraught people, were left behind. On the way another couple from our district was picked up. We were taken to Gulbene, where a line of cattle wagons was already waiting. Through the open doors guarded by soldiers, one could see that there were already many people inside. An announcement came that the men had to travel in separate carriages to prevent embarrassment, we would all be together at the end. We were naive enough to believe that. Our luggage was to be put in a special carriage and only a small suitcase was to be carried, because it was only for a few days, after all, one didn't need much. We said goodbye to our husbands. As we boarded the carriage, my travelling companion and I jokingly sang a few snatches of

«Wide and mighty is my native land»¹. All the women in the carriage looked at us suspiciously. Apparently they thought we were spies. At both ends of the carriage there were double bunks, and a «toilet», that is, a hole in the floor near the wall.

There was a young mother with three children in the carriage. Her relatives and the children's two grandmothers were standing outside, begging for the children to be given back. Finally both young daughters were released, but the eldest child, a son, remained. Another young mother had a small baby in her arms and a two-year-old boy. There was an invalid with three of her brother's young children; a woman with three daughters aged ten, fourteen and eighteen; another one with girls of about the same age; yet another with two boys; and one with a ten-year-old son and an eighteen-year-old daughter. In addition, there were several older mothers and the three of us without children.

The cattle wagons stopped in Gulbene for three days. When relatives found out what had happened, they came and brought us things. My brother-in-law brought us some food and money.

I think we crossed the Russian border at night. After a few days the train stopped during the night, the carriages were shunted back and forth, and the one in which the men were travelling was uncoupled. Later we discovered that they were no longer there. On the way we also found out that war had started.² The train halted at some stations, where we were given millet porridge and sometimes soup. At first we weren't hungry, but later when we were, there was nothing to eat. On one occasion we stopped in an

¹ «Wide and mighty is my native land» – a Soviet propaganda song praising the vast «motherland» where everyone supposedly enjoyed unlimited freedom.

² War had started – The reference here is to Nazi Germany's attack on the Soviet Union on 22 June, 1941.

uninhabited place, where there was a marsh by the railroad. We were allowed to get out, whereupon we wasted no time in washing ourselves.

We travelled for three weeks. We were ordered to get off at the Adadima station. We asked where our men were. They just laughed. All the luggage was issued to us, the men hadn't received anything. We sat down near a fence, in groups that had travelled in the same wagon. Soon employers arrived in horse-drawn carriages. One group after another was taken away, but nobody wanted us because of the large number of children. Finally, after almost a week, we too were taken to the kolkhoz «Kirov» in the village of Medvedska, about forty kilometres away. We were accommodated in two empty houses, the owners of which had been deported earlier on. Thirteen of us set up home in two tiny rooms. We had almost no food left.

Some Russian women came to inspect us. None of us could speak Russian except Mrs Kliezbergs, who tried to get things done on our behalf. We began exchanging our meagre belongings for food.

Those who were able to work were registered the very next day, and we had to go to work. We were glad – we would earn some money. Brigade commander Zenovey, a very stern man who had tuberculosis (otherwise he would have been fighting at the front), believed his main duty was to put everyone to work. Early every morning he would ride his horse, crack his whip in front of each house and yell, «Get to work!» We would hurry, climb into a big cart drawn by two horses and be taken to a hay field, frequently far away. When we got there, we often found that there was nothing to do, because it was too wet or something else was the matter, so we would be idle for hours. When there was something to do,

we worked hard. For lunch we would make some soup, and we got bread also. In our spare time we used to sing, not because we were in a cheerful mood, but only to lift our spirits. We all knew a popular little love song about a girl with eyes as blue as cornflowers, and to this tune we composed our own words, telling about our harsh life here, describing the miserable living conditions of the Russians and urging them to do something about it. The village of Medvedska was overgrown with nettles and sinking in manure. Cow dung was just shoved out behind the sheds, where it mounted up and became covered with nettles. No-one was aware that manure could be used to fertilise fields. Onions were the staple food, which they simply dipped in salt and ate, and if bread happened to be available, well then, what more could you wish for?

The brigade commander's wife, Polka, was a sharp-tongued woman, so we jokingly made up a little ditty about her, too.

As soon as we arrived in the village, we started making enquiries about the whereabouts of our husbands. We wrote to all kinds of places, but didn't receive a reply.

Harvest time arrived. At first the wheat was cut with a combine harvester, but more often than not it would be idle. When the cutting was done with a horse-powered machine, we bound sheaves. Those who met the quota were promised some grain. The three of us, Milda, Emma and I, who were here alone, arranged for the two of them to pass me a few sheaves as I worked between them, so that I could achieve the quota. And so this way I earned 40 kg of corn, which was a great benefit to us. In their spare time, the locals roasted corn on an old tin over a fire and ate it. The boys who carted the corn away would drive the horses so hard that the corn was scattered all along the roads. Also, cattle

were free to roam around the fields and eat from the piles of wheat. When I saw that, one day I calmly put some in my pocket, in full view of everyone. My goodness, the horror of what happened then! I was nearly put in prison.

I used to knit mittens for the Russian women. Knowing that at work we would often be idle, I once took my knitting with me. You should have seen the commotion when they saw me knitting! During working hours you were not permitted to perform another task, you see.

As autumn approached, our conditions became increasingly worse. Bread was issued in small quantities, if at all. The harvest was handed over to the army. We were reminded that we were already in debt for what we had eaten.

Whatever the task, whether threshing or winnowing grain out in the field, we were frightfully cold. It became harder and harder for me to work because I was expecting a baby. Fortunately I still had some things, which I exchanged for potatoes, milk and so on.

When my little daughter was born, my neighbours prepared a marvellous lunch – horsemeat rissoles! A horse which was no longer useful had been slaughtered in the kolkhoz, and kind-hearted Mrs Kliezbergs had scrounged four kilograms for us. The Russian women treated us kindly. They too were having a hard time – their sons and husbands were at the front, and news of casualties were starting to come in. We all lived in constant dread.

After repeated requests, we finally got a horse, so that we could go a fair way into the forest and, in the deep snow, cut small birchtrees for firewood. Some of us would accompany the Russian women to other villages to barter, mostly for potatoes.

In that summer, toward autumn, a lot of Germans from Saratov and the Volga region were brought to the kolkhoz. They had lived

in Russia for two hundred years. They arrived with their families and a lot of belongings. Later, however, the strongest men were sent to various labouring jobs at the front.

When spring came, the kolkhoz had grown even poorer. We discovered that it was possible to gather ears of corn in a field belonging to a state collective farm just outside the borders of our kolkhoz. I left my baby daughter with old Mrs Lauris and went off to gather these ears. That really got us out of a difficult situation. Some people put a match to the stubble, which then got scorched, and it was easier to see ears of corn. We rubbed the grains out and steamed them. But then we were forbidden to gather these ears. I did it anyway, and no-one confiscated them as we had been warned.

We had to do all kinds of work once more. Zenovey would just crack his whip and yell again. It was late spring. Sowing had to be done. I and other women, Russians, were taken to a field where lush, knee-high grass was growing. We were ordered to line up and sow oats on this field of grass. Some kind of harrow was driven behind us which «worked in» the seed. And so the target was met, that is, oats had been sown.

On one occasion we had nothing to do. Suddenly a boy began beating a horse. When someone protested, he beat it even harder. I don't know what made me get up, go up to the boy, take him by the scruff of the neck and push him away headlong. Everyone just looked at me, but nobody said a word.

In the middle of summer we received news that some of us stronger ones had to go somewhere else. From our room, Milda, Emma, Mrs Gedrauskis and her daughters had to go. After some time the rest of us had to go, too. I managed to exchange a few items for food. If memory serves me right, we were taken to

Nazarova, where we spent several days in an open field. Then we boarded a train that took us as far as Krasnoyarsk. On this journey we had our first «introduction» to lice. In Krasnoyarsk we had to stay lined up along one side of a fence. It's hard to describe the misery we all had to suffer, especially I and my baby. Sometimes we would stand in an endless queue for soup – water. What a piece of good luck it was to be able to reach a cabbage or beetroot leaf through the fence somewhere! I was still breast-feeding my daughter. We cooked up something on piled-up stones, but it wasn't fit for a child. Mrs Lauris was of tremendous help to me. She looked after my baby while I went somewhere or did something. One day I bought a box of matches for a rouble. It turned out that there were matches only on the top, the rest were woodchips.

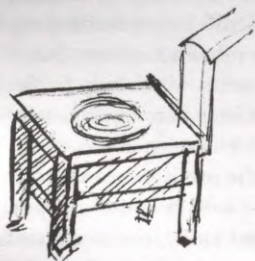
There was a big heap of dirty, coarse salt in a muddy spot. I wanted to take a handful. As I reached out for it, an armed guard appeared and yelled, «Not permitted!»

We spent almost a month in Krasnoyarsk. Finally, with a great deal of pushing and shoving, we managed to board the steamboat «Stalin». We were put on the deck as close to each other as possible. Some Germans, Finns and others were also travelling on this boat. Some people had to disembark in Igarka. Heaven knows why we, about five families, were dropped off on the left bank of the Yenisey River, in Yeryomina, where there was one fisherman's hut and a bath-house without a roof.

We all crowded into the bath-house and stayed there for about three weeks, starving and freezing, for it was already autumn. We survived on red bilberries and rosehips (we ate the briar rose as if it were bread).

At last a boat, which was tugging behind it a huge raft with logs and other building materials, stopped by the river bank. We

were assembled and taken aboard. After travelling about fifty kilometres, we were again left on a barren shore, where there was just a small barrack, an old fishermen's hut and a few tents occupied by the Germans who had been deported here earlier. Many



A tin stove.

more Germans, Latvians and Finns from Leningrad were brought in on the same boat. Apparently some tents were also brought, which the German men put up. About forty people occupied our tent. In the middle there was a tin stove that smoked terribly. Along the tent walls were something resembling bunks, with green birch-tree branches to sleep on. We slept in our clothes and so close to each other that everyone had to turn on his or her side at the same time.

We were issued 300 grams of flour.

The tin stove was used for warming yourself, drying, and boiling a «white soup» consisting of water and a bit of flour. Some people made «flat bread» – some salt sprinkled on the stove and a small piece of dough. Lice plagued us more and more.

We had to go to work straightaway. The rafts with the huge logs had begun to freeze in, and we had to break them loose and then, using picks, hack them. When a log was loose, long ropes were tied to each end, with about twenty people, mainly women, to each rope. In this way, to the order «One, two, together, and again...!» we pulled the logs up onto the shore. Everyone was hungry and no-one had any energy left, and the task became harder with each passing day, for many of the elderly and the

The Dark Pages of My Life

young died, and there were fewer and fewer workers. I tried to look after my baby as much as I could, but she had been coughing for quite a while and was now wheezing. I was still breast-feeding her. It was frightfully cold in the tent, there was no way I could take good care of her, all I could do was kill the lice.

Work began on building dugouts. The Germans, of course, went into the first ones that were ready, because the supervisor and other people in charge were German. Finally we, too, moved into one, where it was warmer. Again there were double bunks all around, a small stove in the middle, and for firewood, young, green birch trees and brushwood, which were progressively more difficult to obtain. When the Yenisey River froze, some bread was brought in from Plahina – 800 grams for those who worked, 400 grams for those who did not.

My baby daughter passed away on 15 November when we were already in the dugout. With great difficulty I got some boards, begged the Germans to give me some nails and made a small box in which to put my dead child. Mrs Kamols and other Latvian women helped me dig the grave. We lit a fire to thaw out the ground, then hacked and dug with pickaxes until we got through the half-metre permafrost. Below that there was soft sand. We dug a proper little grave. At the bottom, along one side I scraped out a hollow among the roots with my bare hands, and into this I placed my precious small box, my darling Malda, my little will-o'-the-wisp. Mrs Zemzars sang «Among the stars up on high» by herself. The grave was filled with other bodies. Later on the dead were stacked in an empty tent. Some families lost three or four, or even all their members. Ever smaller numbers of people were available to pull the ropes. We thought the dead were lucky not to have to suffer any more. The naive Latvian women

would at first lay out the departed in their best clothes and shoes. Later we found out that these were taken, as well as rings and even gold teeth. The people in charge, Russians and Germans, were the culprits. It was forbidden to take anything belonging to people who had died. The belongings were supposed to be collected and distributed to those in need. No-one received anything, those who had issued the orders got everything. The supervisor was a man by the name of Foss, and the chief administrator was a dreadful, red-haired woman called Katya (we called her «the Witch»). The brigade commander was Roberts, and the man in charge of stores was Makarov, a Russian.

They and their families all lived in the barracks. They lacked for nothing, and they also looked after the other Germans, whereas we, in their opinion, were to be wiped out. I remember one day, on my way back from pulling logs, I tripped and fell. As I struggled to get up, I saw that I had tripped over a foot, the owner of which was lying there, covered with snow. The famine was appalling. I was still able to divide my little bit of bread into three portions and eat three times, but some people would eat it in one go. Occasionally some tiny fish were issued. In the -40°C to -50°C arctic cold, we could only drag out one or two logs a day, later on we couldn't even manage that, but then we didn't get any bread, either. Day and night, we were continually tormented by the thought of food. As soon as a few of us women were together, we would fantasise, «cook» and «bake» whatever we remembered or made up. We would all listen enthusiastically and write down these recipes if a piece of paper was available. That is how all the photographs I had with me ended up with recipes on the back.

Towards spring some builders arrived from Igarka. A barrack was built from our logs. When the dugouts started to melt, we all

moved into it (there weren't many of us left, after all). Our dugout was on the verge of collapsing when Mrs Malenders, in utter despair, implored me to go and help her pull out her young son, Indulis. I was so weak I could hardly drag myself along, however, between the two of us we managed to pull her child out of the mud.

There was still pack ice on the Yenisey River when we, the «strongest», were organised to go out to fish. The boats were overloaded with people. Manoeuvring between hunks of ice, we made our way to an island. There we were divided into several work brigades, with three shifts working on one net. Our brigade, consisting of a couple of women and several German boys, was led by Ksenija Kliezbergs. The net was old. We didn't know how to do anything. We would cast the net and haul it in empty. As soon as we caught some tiny fish, the Germans would appear and demand them for use as bait. They devoured the fish themselves. We used to pick, boil and eat grass. We were told we would get bread for coupons when we delivered fish to the government. One day I found some nettles growing in a spot – what a delicacy! The next day there wasn't a single leaf left. We never had a good catch, so we had nothing to turn over to the state. With luck, sometimes we were allowed to keep the tiny fish and add them to the grass we cooked. Later our team was moved to another place, where we had more freedom. There we secretly fried any small fish over a fire on the shore and ate it, half raw, with some coarse salt. It was so disgusting that at times we couldn't keep it down. We fished barefoot. On one occasion I cut my foot and it became swollen. I had to return to Agapitova. I received no bread, of course, because I wasn't working, after all. Even though I could only walk on one foot, I would make my way to the woods and

pick bilberries and mushrooms. Shura was supposed to be the doctor's assistant (we called her «the Exterminator»). I still had a small, nickel plated watch, which I offered her. I «sold» it for a loaf of bread, a litre of oil and a kilo of dark noodles. That was how, at that critical time, my husband's gift saved my life.

The order came to bark linden trees. One day, with extreme difficulty, I had managed to get a small bundle of it. I limped home and put it down outside the barrack. When I came out, the bundle was gone. The people who didn't go fishing potted around the «farm» and also barked linden trees. And so one of them stole my bark. In general, there was a great deal of theft. In autumn they had already stolen my husband's winter hat, but in spring, when we started fishing, his shoes.

In addition to lice, there were masses of cockroaches in the barracks, it was impossible to sleep. One night I slept outside on the logs. Early that morning I heard the whistle of a steamboat. After a while «the Exterminator» came running, calling out a few people and telling them they had to go to Igarka to cut hay. Those who were chosen were happy to get away from here. I limped up to the supervisor and asked if I could go, too. She glanced at me and said, «You have to stay and fish.» I replied that I couldn't go fishing any more. She probably saw the condition I was in. Soon «the Exterminator» ran up to me and said that, if I could get ready in five minutes, I could go, too. Of course I could get ready. I put a blanket down, threw in my woven rope shoes, the Russian style cast-iron pot and other bits and pieces, and I was ready. I hobbled down to the steamboat and clambered on. It was moored there until the evening, but no-one risked getting off.

The following day we reached Igarka, where we found ourselves in an old town. A horse-drawn carriage arrived, into which

we put our belongings and alongside which we walked to the new town located about three kilometres away. Afterwards eyewitnesses told us what a horrific sight it had been as we had dragged ourselves along the road like walking corpses, barefoot and ragged.

We were housed in a shed. When the authorities came to register us, they realised that we wouldn't be of much use as labourers. So we were put into hospital, where we recovered within a couple of weeks. Ration cards were issued for the following food items per month: 800 g of bread (for those working), 400 g (for those not working), 750 g of sugar, 800 g of fat, 3 kg of fish and 2 kg of macaroni. We had to gather *polytrichum* (a white moss) in the forest, apparently it was added to bread.

Our living quarters were a room in an old barrack. It was the first barrack built by the first deportees to Igarka. There were eight of us in one room.

Some Russian women began looking in on us, both out of curiosity and a hope of obtaining something from us. And not without success – some of us still had a bed sheet or two, or a pair of socks. In a little bag I had a present from my father-in-law, the fur of a fox he had shot himself. I pulled it out and gave it a shake, it was still quite good. And lo and behold! This little item saved me at this difficult time. I «sold» it to a pilot's wife for bread, oil and a little money.

A workshop was set up, in which the German women did some sewing, for they had their own machines, and the Latvian women, including me, did the knitting. Two boys also worked there. We used to arrive there before starting time because the place was heated. There was always a fire burning in the cast-iron stove in the middle of the workshop. We would unpick and process all kinds of used garments, and from them knit new ones.

We were not paid, but it was vital to get food and to work in warm conditions. But best of all – we started getting private orders. The payment for this work was, of course, food. There was an airport in Igarka, and the pilots' wives were not short of anything. Bosses as well as members of the Communist Party had their own shops.

In order to warm our draughty room just a little, we used to drag some wood from the forest, or sometimes pinch a piece or two from the workshop, or take some small cut-off bit from the kindergarten on our way home.

Twice a month all the deportees had to be registered. Late at night the long corridor at the KGB would be swarming with people. Next to the many stoves in the corridor were piles of good firewood. On the way out you sometimes managed, if you were lucky, to hide a chunk under your big shawl. If caught, you could have been shot.

At work we used to boil water in our own small tin on the stove. Lunch was a piece of bread with salt and the hot water. Occasionally we could obtain a kind of fish fat which, when salted in small pieces, was almost transparent. It tasted of real fish oil. If you had a piece of this to rub on your bread, what a tasty morsel that was! Somehow we survived that winter, although our beloved old Mrs Lauris died.

In spring I was assigned as team leader to cutting firewood in the forest. In my «brigade» there were two old German women and two boys. They couldn't and wouldn't work. I worked fit to bust. If we didn't prepare the quantity demanded, I was threatened with punishment.

Getting paid for the work was out of the question. In the second winter we did crocheting in the workshop «Labour». In spring I was sent to a hay field, about 100 kilometres north to the

island of Talnychnaya on the Yenisey River. The brigade commander was a Russian, there were also a few German women, some teenagers and a Finnish youth. We worked as hard as our strength and skill permitted. Some wild onions and sorrel grew on the banks of the Yenisey. We ate them like cattle. We cut and mixed them with salt, and if there was a drop or two of oil and a piece of bread, we had a veritable feast. To get bread we had to go over to the village of Suharik. I remember one occasion when we got there, but there was no bread, we had to wait. We spent the night shivering in a shed on the bank of the river. There was bread in the morning, but we couldn't travel back because of a storm. Towards evening the storm abated somewhat, so we set off, but the waves were huge. The Finnish youth was steering the boat, and I and one German woman were rowing, but she was frightened to death and, dropping the oar, kneeled down in the boat, praying and crossing herself. It's hard to comprehend where a person gets the supernatural strength at a life-or-death moment, but that time I rowed across the Yenisey all by myself. The boat was being tossed the whole time. It was only thanks to the excellent navigating skill of the Finnish boy that we reached the other side.

We returned to Igarka by the last steamboat before the Yenisey River began to freeze over. We received no payment for the work done in the workshop. The following spring I was assigned as team leader to cutting hay. That was dreadful! My team consisted of a few old German women and a bunch of teenagers who neither could, nor knew how, nor wanted to work. I was unbelievably exhausted.

A few Latvian women found work as servants or nannies in the homes of «the upper class». I, too, was employed by the wife

of a young pilot. She was uneducated, one might even say thick-headed, but considered herself very clever. I couldn't stand the humiliation she put me through and left.

In the meantime our workshop was closed. I went to work as cleaner in the sewing workshop «Lyegprom». When spring came, it was off to the fields again, this time just 15 kilometres away. Once a week we could go to Igarka to get bread. One day toward autumn, an administrator arrived and told me to leave the work in the fields, as I was needed as a servant for the chief engineer, whose wife was leaving to study in Moscow for three months. The brigade commander tried to talk him out of it because he didn't want to lose a hard worker, but it was no use. No-one asked me if I wanted to go, and so I started my new job. I did my best. The man was a war invalid and possibly also shell-shocked. They had a daughter, Inna, very spoilt and insolent. When the father became angry, he would beat her so mercilessly that I couldn't stand her screams. One day I ran to console her and was belted across the shoulders.

After the designated three months, I went back to the «Lyegprom» workshop, and in summer to chopping firewood. At that time I was already living elsewhere with my friend Matilde. In winter I started sewing mass-produced clothing in the workshop, but in spring the workshop was closed. Then we were both employed at «Igartorg», Matilde as a skilled seamstress, I as a driver. I drove an oxcart pulled by Mishka, who barely moved. I carted whatever I was told to – groceries to shops, firewood, and so on. Then I was employed to sew clothes. We were living with an old cutter, in the corridor, the two of us women on one bunk. We used to go to work early and return late, that way we got more done. I received a good bonus. Officials came to look at this

«latishka» (Russian for «Latvian woman») who had earned so many bonus points. I also learned to make trousers. The cutter used to get private orders. Matilde made the jackets, and I made the trousers. The lion's share of the earnings was pocketed by the cutter, of course. But in spring, because I was single and in the prime of my life, I was again assigned to working in the fields.

We were constantly short of bread. When it was no longer rationed, we would start queuing up at the shop in the evening, write the number on the back and go to check the queue during the night, but even so only the strongest got any bread because there wasn't enough. In later years it became somewhat easier, although you still weren't allowed to have a lunch break. So there were times when I had no bread for two weeks. Bread seemed to be the most precious thing in the world. If I'd had as much of it as I wanted, I think I wouldn't have wished for anything else.

News spread that our master was leaving and a new cutter was arriving with his family. Obviously we wouldn't be able to live there any longer. Matilde had already made arrangements to stay with a Latvian woman, but I had to go and work in the fields. Where would I live afterwards? A Ukrainian, who had recently served a ten-year sentence, but had been given another ten years in Igarka, was the supervisor at «Igartorg». I asked him where I could live. He told me I could go and stay with him. I stamped my foot in anger and told him to stop making fun of me, as I was serious. He answered that he was also serious. And so he obtained bread for me and tried to help in all sorts of ways.

When I left for the fields, he and Matilde accompanied me to the steamboat. As soon as they had left, «extra» news arrived that some of us, including me, were not to go to the fields, but had to go to Dikson to fish instead. Some people got off the boat, but

I didn't. I became so hysterical that they wouldn't have taken me alive. The brigade commander took my side and as a result I went to work in the fields.

At first we cut bushes and levelled the ground. Grass grew quickly and we began cutting it. The cook would make soup for lunch and boil water for the evening meal. We were no longer starving. On Sundays, office people were sent to help us. The supervisor also arrived. He protected and looked after me. When there is absolutely no-one to help or console you, you begin to feel gratitude and warmth in your heart.

In the autumn, when the River Yenisey began to freeze over, we returned on the hay barge. We arrived in Igarka late at night. He was there to meet me in a horse-drawn cart. I had no alternative but to go with him. He had a small room. So we began to live together, but the workshop in Igarka was closed.

However, I continued making clothes at home. I made a lot of work clothes, overalls. For instance, a roll of material would be delivered in the evening and the order was for six large overalls to be ready by the morning, otherwise, they warned, the bread carters would not be admitted into the bread store in the morning. So I would manage to make three overalls, and Matilde with her friend the other three, otherwise the town could have been left without bread. Another time ten pairs of padded mittens for woodcutters were ordered for the next morning. Again I accomplished it.

At last I had someone who defended me. I wasn't sent off anywhere in summer. In May, 1951, my daughter Maija was born.

I was aware that one's pension depended on the number of years in employment, so I made sure I got witnesses to certify how long I had worked in the «Labour» and «Lyegprom» workshops.

The Dark Pages of My Life

Life gradually became more normal. My husband, Kornely Yosifovich Chernenko, put in a request for rehabilitation and quite soon got it. His pay doubled. In 1956 Latvians were issued with passports. It looked as if we could now return to our homeland (some had already done so), but we had nothing to go back to. We had to save some money to start a new life, so we stayed until 1959.

And so, on 4 June, 1959, when there was still pack ice on the Yenisey River, we set off on the first steamboat, the «Stalin». We didn't have to pay for the fare. The three of us and our luggage were transported for free. My daughter was by then eight years old.

In Latvia I soon found a job. When it was time for me to retire, it became clear that the certificates of my witnesses were not valid because ten years had passed since I got them. I had already been rehabilitated, as had my first husband, Nikolajs Vilnis, but that didn't count, either. I submitted another request to be rehabilitated. The response was that I wasn't entitled to be, as I had been a «free citizen» who had only been transferred. Finally I obtained rehabilitation documents from Moscow which acknowledged all my years in exile as years of unbroken service.

It wasn't until 1956, after the war, that I was called to the KGB and informed that my husband had died on 25 May, 1943, in the Sverdlovsk region. The poor man had survived just two years.

If there was a pleasant memory from Siberia, it would be that of the northern lights. When we fished at midnight on the river, the sun would slide down towards the horizon, move forward as if in a hurry, and after a while rise again. The tundra was also beautiful, especially in autumn.

WINTER BY THE WHITE SEA

Lilija Biviņa

The sun had gone, the cottongrass¹ had withered, our first summer in the camp sank into the depths of the swamp as we constructed a cemetery for the free citizens of the Severnaya Dvina² region. Other work brigades were building houses for them.

As is the custom, the deceased were laid out, placed in coffins and, followed by weeping, heartbroken relatives, taken to this cemetery. Our burial was not like that. In the mornings a light-brown, puny little horse harnessed to a cart, stood at the gate of the camp compound either beside or behind the work brigades. With its head hanging, stamping sleepily, it waited for its turn to be let out through the gate.



Cottongrass.

¹ *Cottongrass* – a low rushlike plant native to the northern hemisphere. Cottongrasses have grass-like leaves and are found in swamps, bogs, or wet meadows, where they grow 45-120 cm high.

² *Severnaya Dvina* – «the Northern Dvina», a river in Russia. The Latvian river Daugava, which rises in Russia, is referred to by the Russians as Zapadnaya Dvina, i.e. «the Western Dvina».

The load it had to take was large and heavy, rather carelessly covered with a tarpaulin, under which numbered tags made of veneer were clearly visible. They were tied to yellow or bluish feet, and the numbers on them were a graphic indication of how many thousands of people had got no further than this cart and were now no longer able to walk or escape on their own two legs.

Our graveyard was near the Kudyma River. The light-brown horse plodded along, pulling its load as far as the pit that had been dug, the driver threw the contents into it, filled and levelled it, and the horse could then return home at a slow trot. The weight of the load no longer pressed on the back of its neck, so the way back was easy and pleasant.

However, our people were not destined to lie in the pits forever. Very frequently, when the river flooded in spring, bodies which had been buried in shallow graves were washed out, and again, but now for the last time, our people could stare at the sun with unseeing eyes, while their corpses floated away for ever into the vast, free expanse of the White Sea.

With each passing day, natural selection took place more and more frequently, but the best were not always spared. We had learnt to laugh at ourselves, and often when Silva and I saw this horse and the overloaded cart, we would throw a glance at the rows of the living and with an ironic smile, our lips would utter the old saying «the wicked flourish». The best as well as the worst perished. Death had a difficult job, for no-one wanted to die, everyone wished to return home.

There was almost no autumn in this place. Winter arrived suddenly. First there was frost, the temperature dropped below zero, the snow didn't melt, and then a long, long winter.

Our work brigade had to accurately stack 32,000 cubic metres of timber boards. A pointless task, carrying a board on your

Winter by the White Sea

shoulders in one direction, returning without it in the other. Your legs got tired, shoulders ached, and in your dreams an infinitely long paling fence disappeared in the distance.

BREAD

We suffered more than just hunger. We experienced semi-starvation, which made us hold a small crust of bread with a feeling of reverence. Yet there was always something to hold in your hand, even if it was only hope. That's not famine. Famine is easier to endure, for then there is no longer hope for that tiny «something». I believe that near-starvation is a more difficult experience, one in which your organism is forced to struggle on today, tomorrow and for many days to come. Famine decides the outcome of the struggle within a shorter time, sooner for some, later for others. It's possible, however, to live half-starved for an awfully long time, for years, and this incalculable continuation is shattering. Famine renders you indifferent to your fate and makes your body weak, you hallucinate, then perish. When you are half-starved, on the other hand, you want to live every day and there is no feeling of indifference. Once you begin to feel apathetic when you are half-starved, then that signals the end, your body has exhausted itself, and the person ends his or her existence if not at their own hand, then slowly going out like a flame.

Sozi was a depressing worksite. No matter how hard we tried, we had no strength and consequently we got no bread. The day was insufferably long in the trenches we were digging for the city's water and sewerage pipes. The site was located 14 kilometres from the camp. Those of us who worked in Sozi were woken an hour and a half earlier than the others, but we returned from

work at various times. In the mornings the open platforms were always waiting for us, but in the evenings it was always we who waited for the platforms. I don't recall one occasion when it wasn't so.

We had long since learned to survive without lunch, on 300 g of bread a day, and it seemed as if our organisms had become accustomed to this regimen, for there was absolutely no hope of a change until the job was finished. The money for the Sozi project had run out, but we had to keep working as best we could. Another year or so was needed to finish the job. The people in our brigades had conditioned themselves to do without food and, wearing torn rubber boots, to stand in ice-cold water all day. Our hands moved of their own accord, throwing out sand from the eight-metre-deep trench. Even at night, during the short hours of rest, our hands and fingers, stiffly bent as if still holding a shovel, moved continually and prevented those sleeping beside us from having a good rest.

On sunny mornings, when it wasn't too cold, we would hurry to the swamp. Our feet, clad only in rubber boots, didn't freeze so much in the water and, besides, we could eat some frozen cranberries hiding in the snow-covered moss.

There were two things that always terrified us: one was starting a trench, the other was finishing one. When we started one, we had nowhere to warm our feet, but even that wasn't as awful as finishing it.

When the poles had been put in, they had to be cut to preset levels under water. A cover was placed over them, and on this cover sewerage or water pipes were laid. The pipes had to have the correct fall.

I still remember with horror the moment when we had to throw down our mittens, take hold of a saw and use it in the icy

water for an indefinite length of time. And also when the last log was removed. It was there for support and held the frame with tongued and grooved lining boards, so that the trench walls could be reinforced. It was like removing the last brace of your own grave. At first your heart beat wildly – will you be faster than the collapsing sand, chunks of frozen soil and peat, or not? Usually two people knocked out the last brace. In the beginning we took turns, but later it became routine for me and Herta, an Estonian, to carry out this task. We had simply had a lot of practice, but still you often had to try and free your half-buried partner using a trench spade in a frantic struggle. A few seconds longer, and a human being could cease to be. In these brief moments it never occurred to me that I myself could be buried alive. My only thought was how to free the endangered workmate. Whenever I noticed that there was an urgent need to hurry, I would call out one word to Herta, «Hurry, hurry!» And Herta would first lift herself, then pull me out of the pit. She was bigger and stronger than I, that was why she would always get out of the collapsing grave first and drag me out after, for I wouldn't have had the strength to pull her out of the pit.

When the danger was past, we would stand next to each other for a moment, smile at each other and say, «Well done, my dear.» Well indeed, but what about the next time? We didn't dwell on that, we'd think about it when the next time was behind us.

But on that day we had only just started a new section of the trench. We picked frozen cranberries out of the snow and longed for the icy water in which to warm our feet. The temperature was ten degrees below zero, the sun was shining and we were digging. Suddenly the sun disappeared although it wasn't even half past eleven. That was a bad sign. We became edgy. And sure enough a

mere fifteen minutes later we could no longer see anything either on the ground or in the sky. A blizzard.

It was impossible to work because we couldn't see where to aim the spade. The convoy chief hurried off in search of a telephone to find out what to do with us. He returned after a while and said that the weather conditions in town were calm but if the brigades couldn't work he was to move them from the site and herd them together somewhere until the weather improved.

We were quickly taken off the job and hustled into a burnt-out building with no windows or doors. The ground was shockingly foul with excrement so we couldn't sit down anywhere. There wasn't enough room for everyone anyway.

We found some bits of burnt boards and some people sat down on these others on the bare ground, still others on someone's lap and almost on top of each other. It was warmer that way, for the wind was blowing through the window and door openings, howling and bringing with it masses of snow.

We ate the 200 g of bread we had saved for lunch, having eaten only soup in the morning. For dinner we would get soup again and 100 g of bread. We had been on short rations for a long time and had grown accustomed to it. There were, of course, a few weaker individuals who devoured both the soup and the bread in the morning. They found it harder to last the day. But there weren't many such gluttons, for every prisoner knew how to divide up the calories.

We wanted to sleep a while, but the wind and snow prevented us from closing our eyes. We tried to find solace in songs. But singing didn't warm our bodies, in fact it required a great deal of energy. Our songs faded away, we fell silent. But the howling gale did not do likewise. The blizzard continued. Time passed.

Winter by the White Sea

The chief convoy guard became uneasy and somehow managed to get to a telephone again. After a very long time he returned with bad news – there was a snowstorm in the town, roads were closed, platforms would not be sent to pick us up as the railway tracks were covered with snow and couldn't be cleared. We would have to wait until the blizzard was over. Wait! That was easy to say!

We were gradually snowed in. We stood up, hopped around to get warm but that required a huge amount of energy. So we sat, silent. For a long time. It was dark outside. We waited. For what?

The snowstorm continued to rage. Evening fell, the chief could no longer communicate with the town – the lines had come down. We waited. Was it for the night?

At ten o'clock that night, the chief of the convoy took charge. We wondered what he had in mind.

For the first and probably last time during our imprisonment, we were not counted because it couldn't be done and there was no point anyway. We held onto each other in order not to get lost. Tight. No power on earth could have made us let go, because that would have meant certain death.

We couldn't understand at first what the chief had thought up. Before we were allowed to leave the burnt-out house, two guards went and stood in the door opening. The second one held onto the first one by firmly grasping the back of the first soldier's belt. The first prisoner who went out had to grip the second guard's belt, and so on. The prisoners who followed clung to the waistbands of the ones in front, waistbands that were belts, string, whatever one had come up with to keep the padded jacket closer to one's body. Then this rope of the living began to move, a long rope consisting of 300 human beings. The procession ended with the rest of the guards and the chief of the convoy.

Where were we going? No-one knew. But every move forward was a hope of arriving somewhere, leaving despondency and inertia behind.

It was night. A storm. Hell on earth and in the heavens. There was no concept of time, almost a state of non-existence. And then over the noise of the howling wind, the shouted command of the people in front was heard. «Careful! Mind your step! A pipe!» In single file we were being taken along the top of pipes laid to convey sand. A pipe road, 12 kilometres long, with a swamp somewhere far below on either side, for the pipes were laid on a high embankment. A slight movement to the right or left meant certain death. There was no way one could have climbed up from the swamp.

The pipes were about a metre or more in diameter. Along the top was a path, if you could call it that, the narrowest track you could imagine. In infinite silence, like ghostly apparitions, a living mass of corpses moved along it.

Our legs were moving. But what about the rest of our body? We simply became covered with ice. The storm was blowing from the left, and we felt a terrible weight. Ice covered the jacket, shawl, the left cheek. A layer of ice gradually covered the left eye. It wouldn't have made any difference if the right one had been covered also, for we couldn't see anyway. Our legs did the seeing and moving. Kilometre after kilometre. Twelve kilometres along the track on the pipes, two kilometres on the road to the camp.

It was half past one at night. From the guardhouse we went straight to the canteen. We didn't have enough strength to trudge to the barracks. We thought it wiser to get warm and revive our bodies and souls with 500 g of hot dinner soup, 100 g of bread and some boiling water as well. It was impossible to squeeze any more calories out of our own bodies, the physical and mental

energy were left behind on the pipeline. We were nothing but the mathematical average of a live human being and a corpse.

It was cold in the canteen. The cook had gone. There was no soup. The bread servery was empty and locked up. So there was no bread to be got. No smoke was coming out of the boiler house, the hot water had been used up and the boilers had been filled with icy-cold water for the next day's tea. Everything for tomorrow. Today had ended. At night there is only the cold, darkness and – nothing.

We dragged ourselves to our barracks. And then, for the first time in my life, I understood the meaning of the frequently inappropriately used words «I don't care». Even now I try to avoid using them in conversation, for I know their deeper meaning, their very essence – a hopeless, but without anguish, yet inevitable end. You no longer need to take off your shoes or your shawl. You don't need to do anything. If only you could clamber up onto the bunk, but if not – you don't care where the end comes, on the bunk, under the bunk, in the aisle between the bunks... The place doesn't matter.

Nothing had any meaning, neither the place nor the time, nothing. One arm tried to lift the body up on the rung, that was successful. Then the other arm helped. Soon there would be that longed-for, everlasting rest.

But then you notice something on the pillow. Your eyes can no longer see, but they've given a secret message to your brain, but it no longer wants to carry out its function. A warm stream is now flowing through your eyes, which feel as if a thick spider's web was over them.

There is bread on the pillow! Bread? No, rather the helping hand and loving heart of a friend. There was no visiting card with

the extra piece of bread attached with a splinter of pinewood to your ration. And it was not important who had left the bread. What mattered was that it had been left, as if to say, «Cheer up, my friend, you're not alone! We knew how you would feel if you returned. We couldn't wait up for you, but even if we had done so, what could we have said? Words would have failed us. Take our hands held out in friendship, they are warm and loving. We hope with all our hearts that you make it through the night. You have to! We want you to, and you also have to want to.»

Have you ever held such a piece of bread in your hand? And could you simply eat it? I don't know. I received one like that. I didn't eat it, but pressed it to my heart. Then quickly I took off my shoes, padded jacket and shawl, and crawled under the blanket with the crust of bread against my heart. I could feel the little sliver of pinewood sticking into me, but that was pleasant, like a pang of sorrow in the midst of great joy. I had to get up in three hours' time. The platforms would be waiting. Sozi. And the way seemed sunny and bright, through Sozi, through the night, through the dark nothingness.

FOUR ROUBLES

How much is the life of a human being, in money terms? Not what is the life of a human being worth, which is a very long and tedious discussion. But in roubles, kopeks. You don't know? Well, ten tongued and grooved lining boards cost 20 roubles. By dividing this sum by five, you get 4 roubles. That is the price of a life. You don't believe me? Shall I prove it? I think everyone is interested in knowing his or her monetary value, but not everyone has considered

whether it's possible to calculate it in the first place. However, in this age of materialism, anything is possible.

Eling on the White Sea is one of the largest shipyards. The main building is 50 metres high, built from red bricks. And almost every brick has cost the life of a prisoner. Yet the building is stable and doesn't sway with horror. Only the northern lights colour it blood-red during stormy autumn nights.

I think painters have a wonderful job. There's something artistic about it. If nothing else, the smell of oil paint brings to mind the Louvre, the Dresden art galleries, the Tretyakov Galleries, the Old Pinakothek in Munich and the Hermitage.

Our work brigade didn't paint on canvas, but on 50-metre-high cranes in Eling. As usual, Estonians and Latvians were kept busy on the most difficult and dangerous jobs. Men's brigades were also working in Eling. There was one women's brigade, Estonians and Latvians, and two men's, of the same nationalities.

On the first day, when I climbed up on the crane with a bucket in one hand, a paintbrush tied to a long handle in the other, and a rope around my waist, I didn't feel particularly safe. Two planks were placed across the metal frames of the crane. We had to use them when moving from one place to another, and we had to lie down on them either on our stomachs or backs, depending on where the surface to be painted was. Of course there were no handrails anywhere, you could always hold on to the air thick with the smell of paint. But these conditions were not deadly, because around our waists we had a rope that was attached to the steel braces. The rope was about 5 metres long, and consequently the freedom of movement extended to 10 metres. To the left and the right of the narrow walk was one of the building's dimensions – a drop of 50 metres.

At first your feet would grip the planks and you felt as if no power on earth could make them let go. Centimetre by centimetre, with our hearts in our mouths, we would change position holding a bucket in one hand, a paintbrush in the other. But later we became accustomed to it.

Frequently it happened that we untied the other end of the rope to enable us to move further, but forgot to tie it to the steel brace, and it would swing happily and temptingly across the bottomless gap as if inviting Fate to yank it and see what happens.

During lunchtime, too, we didn't feel like climbing down but, having eaten our bread and the fried leftovers issued in the morning, we would calmly lie down on one or two planks and have a blissful nap while only the end of the brown rope continued to entice and tempt the abyss.

There was a large number of cranes. Covers consisting of tongued and grooved lining boards had been placed across to enable the brigade that had finished painting one crane to cross to another freely and without unnecessary delay. Compared to two pitiful little planks, this walk was very wide. We walked across it as if it were a bright, glistening highway, and often there was a great deal of laughter if anyone trod on someone else's rope.

It was a very beautiful, sunny summer Saturday. We had been promised that, after three weeks of working without a break, the following day would be free. There wasn't a single prisoner on the site who wasn't looking forward to the evening.

Our brigade had just started painting a new crane and wasn't hurrying, for the pressure of the long, continuous workdays was making itself felt.

Whenever work on a new crane was begun, the brigade commander would first warn the electricians to disconnect the power.

But it often happened that no notice had been taken of the warning, with the result that a painter, having touched the lines with a damp brush, never touched anything anywhere again...

The Estonian men had finished work on their crane and were picking up their things, ready to start on the next one. The first six had collected their buckets and paintbrushes, untied the ropes from the steel braces and with a cheerful «Hurry up, hurry up!» were heading for the timber decking. They didn't wait for the rest, who were still dawdling and couldn't get organised fast enough. The rhythm of the six men's footsteps echoed across the gap. The noise of oxy-welding filled the air, there were the usual sounds of work, when suddenly a totally unfamiliar noise made us look up from our work. Something was cracking, breaking and falling.

The timber decking had vanished, as had the men on it. We couldn't believe our eyes. One minute everything was there, the next there was a gaping shaft between the two cranes. A minute or two later the alarm sounded somewhere down below, and a gong called us to line up.

But first we looked at what was left of the Estonian work brigade. The sculptures of twelve men decorated the gleaming, light-blue crane.

It would have been an outstanding achievement to portray these men, their faces turned into stone, their feet frozen in mid-step, neither bucket nor brush shaking in their hand, everything at a standstill. Only twelve ends of rope were still dangling temptingly across the abyss as if to say, «Come on, Fate, you cheat, give them a tug if you want to, go on!»

Finally we all climbed down. At first we thought we wouldn't witness anything else. Perhaps everything would have been removed by now. But when we reached the scene of the accident,

we couldn't go on. It wasn't the ones who were lying there who stopped us dead in our tracks. No, they had breathed their last and it was all the same to them whether we went or stayed. We weren't looking at the ground but upwards. Up there, about 35 metres above us, caught on something or other, a body was swaying. Then we looked down – five motionless figures were lying at our feet. Five. The sixth man was up there!

Two hours went by before he was taken down by means of a «swing», which refused to stay put in the required position. Two hours.

In two hours one can see an excellent adventure film, travel by plane from Archangelsk to Rīga, listen to Mozart's «Requiem» or Bach's «Mass for Organ and Choir». What did the Estonian youth do in these two hours? First of all his hair turned white. But that didn't take the whole time. What else did he do? Did he perhaps think that it would have been better not to have become caught on the end of the steel girder? How would you have felt in those two hours? Imagine having to look at five motionless figures down below. I don't know what went on in his mind, he wasn't able to say. For a long time after, I was tormented by the question of how he spends the night. Many other questions as well.

There was an investigation into the incident, of course. Five prisoners were brought to book and the foreman was held responsible. The court decision was just: the foreman had to pay the state out of his wage for the damage to government property – 20 roubles for the inadequately thick covers on the ten broken planks.

Do you believe me now? Have I calculated the price of a human life correctly? Perhaps that is the price of your life, too?

ESCAPE

Freedom is the bright, inaccessible sun, the Holy Grail that brings death to the one who has unlawfully drunk from it. A few did, and died. Others didn't die, but life afterwards became horribly bitter.

I know how Fuksis tried to escape. With a crust of bread pressed against her chest, she ran through the forest sparkling in autumn gold, where every moss-covered mound beat the rhythm of the «Marseillaise» for the prisoner's feet now grown so swift and light. Oh, to breathe in deeply the crisp autumn air, which was no longer enclosed by barbed wire or littered with harsh warnings in the rasping voice of a soldier! To run ever further and enjoy a little longer drinking the clean wine of the autumn morning, even though soon the thud of the persecutors' footsteps and the hoarse barks of their dogs would be heard.

I know how Dusya tried to escape. She did so with the intention of reaching lasting freedom and never again falling back into the abyss that was left behind like the hell of the doomed. But she didn't succeed either, for she wanted to reach her homeland much too quickly. Already on the third day she was making her way to the train that would take her away faster from this vale of sorrow. A convoy sergeant happened to recognise her, and that same evening she was again among us. It's hard to say whose despair cut deeper, ours or hers.

I was also tempted once, but the knowledge that those closest to me would suffer made me swallow the bitter disappointment and give up the plan in time. There were few who tried to escape, for the same reason. Those who had no-one back home tried, or those who had lost their good judgement in the long, agonising ordeals and only their sense of self-preservation was left, preventing their mind from being locked into total darkness for ever.

I don't know how Marija lost her mind. It wasn't difficult to guess, for she had been left with two small children, her home had been burnt down, her husband had been shot and thrown into the flames, and she herself given the burden of ten long years of suffering.

I noticed Marija, because for long periods of time she would stand at a window or outside, or in a remote corner somewhere, with her hands clasped and constantly murmuring something to herself. Her eyes were wide, gazing fixedly up to the sky, its indifferent, cool blueness blending into the calm immobility of these eyes, a look typical of people who have become insane because of deep despair.

There are mentally ill people whose stare wavers and shifts and is threatening. One feels no dismay when meeting such a gaze. But it's impossible to look into eyes in which everything has died, as if only a stone were there, a stone sunken into a swamp and bathed in the blue of the sky. It is as if the one gazing into these eyes would be overcome at any moment by the calm of a reason now lost, one's consciousness would return to the beginning of infinity, and only one's body would continue to exist aimlessly.

I didn't disturb Marija as she continued living in a world of her own, but I attempted to understand the whispered words which streamed incessantly over the barbed-wire fence, reaching towards the familiar, beloved little country. I thought she was praying, but when I listened carefully, I heard her saying, «Socks, I should mend your little boots, too. But don't go far, you may get lost, and your feet are wet and muddy today, the potatoes will be ready soon, don't run off now, I won't be long, I won't be long...»

I won't be long... Murderers, what have you done to this mother!

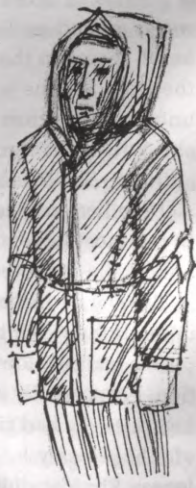
Winter by the White Sea

All the brigades worked in the forest. The invalid brigade, to which Marija also belonged, worked in the housekeeping area. This area was not surrounded by a fence yet, and the cottages of ordinary free citizens were located nearby. Guards were posted all around. Civilians were of course free to go about their business as they pleased.

Marija always went to work wearing her threadbare coat and her own footwear. She didn't accept anything from the state, which could no longer offer her anything. On that fateful morning in late autumn, she calmly walked past the guard without his suspecting that she was a prisoner. It didn't occur to anyone to check where this woman was going. Utterly composed and without any haste she headed for the forest, where just then all the brigades from the camp were busy felling trees.

Judging by the sun, lunch would be in about an hour. But quite unexpectedly the gong sounded, and we were surprised that our sense of time had failed us. While we were still hesitating, a guard was already hurrying towards us, calling out the usual «Hurry, hurry!»

After putting our saws and axes down by the felled pine tree, we grabbed our jackets and bread bags and walked to the checking area, where the lunch would have been brought. But we couldn't see our one-eyed little horse anywhere. The guards and their commander urged us to get into lines of



A jacket.

five, so that they could start counting us. When we had been counted and checked three times, the chief guard gave us an unexpected order: «Run! On the double!»

«Where to?»

«To the camp!»

There could be only one reason for such haste: someone had escaped either from our camp or the one next to ours.

When we entered the camp area, all the other brigades, which had been working closer, were already there. After a few minutes we found out that one of our women had escaped. Who, we wondered. We didn't have to think long. It was Marija!

A veritable storm of thoughts arose in our minds, and a variety of guesses as to the reason for this escape vibrated in whispered words around us. Fear and hope mingled: Wild animals will tear her to pieces in the taiga! The local inhabitants will help her on the way! No-one will refuse to give a helping hand to such an unfortunate human being! She will return of her own accord! No, she will not return. She has gone to her small, abandoned children. She'll be shot! The dogs will rip her apart!

No other escapee was as much in our thoughts and enveloped in our most fervent prayers as Marija. She had to reach home, if only to die at the feet of her children! Home!

But she no longer had a home, there was only an insane, dark, unremitting longing for her children.

She walked slowly, without haste, keeping to a westerly direction. Purposefully and with every step taken, she was approaching those she had given life to. Marija did not realise that the end of a hopelessly long journey would have taken a year or even longer. She also didn't comprehend that this road could end in an hour or sooner. Her footsteps were blessed by the flames of a

mother's love that had not been extinguished by the dark shadow of insanity.

Clearings alternated with woodland, woodland with impenetrable scrub, scrub with marshes, and marshland with forest. There was no path. There was only love and the glow of the setting sun. Oh, to flee ever further from those who had smashed her life with their fists!

The clearing. Behind her the galloping horses and shouts of «Stop or we'll shoot! Stop!» A quick glance over her shoulder and Marija saw the pursuing horses but there were no dogs. In front of her was her saviour, a wood thick with undergrowth which the horses would not be able to penetrate. Her stride turned into a mad dash. Marija ran, her arms outstretched as if wishing to touch the forest. 150 metres, 100 metres 50 metres – any minute now she'd be out of her tormentors' sight.

Now! Nearly there!

She fell with arms extended, the rays of the setting sun caressed her back which was shot through and through with a round from a machine-gun. Her blood was slowly seeping into the ground. Earth, the giver of life, unmoved and pitiless, accepted it.

Towards evening the gong summoned us to assemble. We went out onto the road near the guardhouse. The entire camp. Marija's body had been thrown down in front of us. With the aid of a concrete example in the form of Marija's body the camp supervisor began his pep-talk about the futility of escape. He didn't get far, this supervisor nicknamed «Dobre-dobre» («Good-good»). The women silenced him by calling out «Hero! Shooting a mentally ill woman! Shooting a mother! What a brave thing to do! You probably shot only women in the war too and deserted! A hero

indeed! Taking the life of a helpless, defenceless woman, a mother! Hope your mother is dumped at your feet like this!»

«Dobre-dobre» slunk off. The prisoners lifted Marija's earthly remains in their arms and carried her into the barracks. That evening a coffin was made from some bed-bunk boards and Marija was dressed in her own clothes, no government rags were used. Her hands were crossed and held a small faded photograph of two smiling imps, a little girl and a boy. Marija was holding her children in her stiff hands. The rays of the setting sun had erased the desperate longing from her face, the long journey was at an end, the wheel had come full circle. The Holy Grail had spilled at the edge of the eternally impenetrable Taiga.

4478 AND 5952 DAYS

Arvīds Lasmanis

Arvīds Lasmanis was born in 1915. He graduated from the Latvian Military Academy in Rīga in 1939 and the Latvian Air Force Academy, also in Rīga, in 1940. He was a lieutenant of the 11th Dobeles Infantry Regiment. On 14 July, 1941 Lasmanis was deported to Siberia and there sentenced to 7 years imprisonment with hard labour. In 1944, he was unjustly accused of organising an escape and was sentenced to a further 10 years. He was pardoned in 1956 and returned to Latvia the following year. Until 1967, Lasmanis worked in an office of the Department of Agriculture. He died in Rīga in 1977.

4478 AND 5952 DAYS

I lack the time, willpower, and resources to record all of my experiences. The most I can do is to relate events as I remember them. While I would be happy to know even a little about the lives of my forefathers, the fact is I know almost nothing. Their life stories have gone with them to the grave. This, I feel, is a great pity. Years will pass and I too will be gone. My children will know nothing about their father. About the 4,478 days I spent in captivity. Of the 5,952 days of my life spent in prisons and slave

camps. Of the days spent in exile and in the search for documents to regain my freedom. Of my struggles from the day of my arrest to the day I returned to my small homeland.

I would like my descendants to know why I have travelled this long road, why the best years of my life had to be spent in captivity. I would like them to understand, as much as possible, why their father from the age of 25 to the age of 42 was far away in a corner of the world completely foreign both to his heart and to his mind.

Perhaps they can gain from my paltry notes some knowledge to help them through life. Something to give them courage, strength, drive, perseverance, and endurance in their hour of need. Perhaps some small detail in my story will widen their view of the world and broaden their outlook, give them a clearer idea about the seemingly endless ocean that is called life.

THE ARREST

On 14 July, 1941, I was stationed at the Litene Army camp. I was platoon commander of the Communications Battalion attached to the 295th Infantry Regiment. The soldiers and their sergeants, even a few of the officers, were billeted in tents. The remaining officers lived in barracks or private houses near the camp. I had found a place in a barn about 100 meters from the tents of my platoon. About ten officers from our regiment were in the barn; we slept in the hay. Our uniforms and suits hung in bags along the barn walls and our other possessions were crammed into one or two suitcases tossed onto a pile of last year's hay.

The international situation was very tense. In 1939, Poland had been occupied by German troops. In 1940, France had

followed. There was little doubt that, sooner or later, Hitler would make a move to the east. While I had been on leave in Rīga, people who listened to radio broadcasts from Germany had said as much. They told me that Hitler's plan had been to open up the eastern front in April or, by the very latest, May. But for reasons unknown, the attack had been postponed.

At our camp, there was nothing to indicate any preparation for war. On the contrary, in Rīga, and at the garrison in Valmiera, as well as here in our summer camp, the atmosphere was one of apparent calm.

In all truth, some incidents at our camp had unsettled me. The first of these had been the arrest of Ozoliņš, a lieutenant in our regiment. Eyewitnesses reported that he had been escorted from the camp in a dishevelled state, with the buttons of his uniform torn off, and his hands tied behind his back. Something else had alarmed me. A few days before this, a new tent had been erected in the camp and a whole platoon of foreign troops had moved in. Everyone had been greatly surprised by their arrival. This platoon consisted of regular soldiers, sergeants, and conscripts. In my opinion most of them were not Russians. Their complexions were dark and well tanned. They had low foreheads, black hair, and the narrow eyes characteristic of Asians, and the wide cheekbones of the Mongol race. Most had the badge of the Young Communist League pinned to their uniforms, which, even after the Soviet occupation of Latvia, was something that I had never seen done in the Latvian army. The newcomers seemed timid or, to be more exact, frightened and insecure. We felt uneasy about showing open interest in them, and yet our soldiers could often be seen standing about, watching them with great curiosity.

Today, almost thirty years later, I can still recall the premonition of terror I felt when these foreign soldiers arrived at our

camp. More than once, rumours of possible arrests had been heard. I recall an important incident which occurred at the end of the first week of July just after my return from leave. I found Lieutenant Bujins (class of 1940) lying in the meadow behind our barn studying a map of the area. He said that he was looking for an escape route in case travel by road was blocked. Obviously, Bujins had judged the situation better than most of our senior officers.

I can't recall any other incident from those days, which might have indicated that my colleagues anticipated danger, terror, and impending misfortune. Perhaps it was because, having just returned from leave, I had not had the chance to have a heart to heart talk with any of my colleagues. Bujins was very reserved. His friend Janka kept any thoughts about our possible fate to himself.

Our duties at the camp increased. As a result of the incorporation of the Latvian Army into the Red Army of the Soviet Union, new instructions had been issued and many changes had to be made. I had worries enough within my own platoon. During my absence, 'the boys' had lost the antenna of the radio transmitter. It would be next to impossible to get a new one. Besides, in my opinion, the boys of the platoon had become very slack. Their tent was untidy. They had lost many of their special skills.

I was also worried about my family. My greatest fear was for my youngest brother, Žanis. In May he had been sentenced to 10 years imprisonment. We had received the news from a soldier who had guarded prisoners, amongst them Žanis, awaiting trial. As a member of the Soviet Army (as a result of the annexation of Latvia by the Soviet Union), I had been able to trace my brother to Rīga Central Prison. I had been given permission to talk to him through the prison bars. My brother had seemed very bloated, his face puffy. He said that he had gained weight, but I did not believe him.

«They feed us excellent pea soup,» Žanis had explained. To see my brother behind bars, sentenced to 10 years imprisonment, was dreadful, inconceivable, unthinkable.

After this unbelievable experience, I agonised about the reason «why» until I found myself in exactly the same situation as my brother. It was only then that I realised that the reason «why» was totally irrelevant.

I had returned from leave around 8 June. But even by 14 June, I had not become accustomed to either the new conditions or to our lodgings. Neither had I renewed friendships with my comrades, nor become acquainted with the new members of our regiment. I expressed nothing about either my fears and concern for my family, or the uneasiness and anxiety I felt about our future. I had had ample time to determine the thoughts and feelings of my colleagues about the changes made to camp life during my absence. To my surprise, nobody seemed too concerned about the possibility of danger.

On the morning of 14 June, 1941, the sun shone brightly. We were woken by the regimental orchestra playing a march. This was the command to get up. In a few minutes our barn was empty. Young, strong, healthy men rushed down to the stream to wash and exercise. The sun was high above the pine trees, silvery dew was glistening on the grass, larks were singing in the blue sky. After a deep healthy sleep, I felt carefree and happy, untouched by life's concerns and troubles. I sent the men of my platoon to signals exercises, while I myself headed to that day's lecture for officers. Lieutenant Colonel Lasis's lecture was on the coding and decoding of messages. Maybe it was because it was such a sunny morning, maybe it was because the information the lecturer was so diligently trying to impart to us was already familiar, but the

truth is we lacked all seriousness and concentration. Lieutenant Colonel Lasis was forced to call us to order more than once. Nevertheless, this carefree atmosphere became decidedly unsettled when news reached us that empty cattle cars with bars on the windows and locks on the doors had been seen at Gulbene railway station.

This news completely shattered me. My heart felt heavy, my arms dropped to my side, and thoughts about possible arrests shot through my head. Whom were these freight cars meant for if not us? During the months of the occupation, constant warnings had appeared in the newspapers and on the radio about the enemies of the people: about the saboteurs and counter-revolutionaries. The reactionaries were only waiting for the right moment to begin their disastrous operation, they warned. The enemy is not asleep, be on the alert, they reminded. Every speech, every newspaper article expressed this view. Who was this secret, potential enemy? First and foremost, surely this would include anyone who had worn the uniform of an officer of the Latvian Army. And I was one of these men.

The lecture was about to end. How to act? What to do? I had to make a decision before that «dark hour» was upon us. I was convinced that this hour was approaching. Would I be arrested? And for what crime? I was the son of a farm labourer. Under difficult circumstances and with frequent imploring, I had finally been granted permission by my mother to complete years 5 and 6 of primary school. Each autumn, with tears in my eyes, I had begged to be able to continue on to the next class, until finally I had graduated from High School. Was this the reason? My education? Or was it because I was a good soldier during my compulsory military service? Or because I successfully completed the officer's

candidates course? It would be an injustice to arrest me (me who was not even the son of a landowner!) because I had tried to acquire a profession in order to escape the fate of becoming a labourer. And if, in the future, there was an opportunity to study at the Military Academy and then at the Air Force Academy... What was criminal about doing that?

The lecture came to an end. The officers dispersed. Weighed with doubt and tortured by thoughts about the unknown, I left the lecture room. My head was spinning, my heart was pounding. They have no reason to arrest me, no reason at all! Of course I knew nothing about the teachings of Marx, Engels, Lenin or Stalin. How could I know if I had never come into contact with their ideas? I had grown up here in the land of my fathers, my only homeland. The rivers of Russia: the Volga, Yenisey, Lena, and Ob were foreign to me; but dear to me were our rivers: Daugava, Lielupe, Venta, Gauja. I did not know much about the birth of the Soviet Union, but I did know that great sacrifices had been made to win the independence of Latvia. Many lives had been lost so that Latvians could reclaim their homeland, where they could speak their own language, and where Latvian morals and traditions could flourish. Could I be punished because of this? Could my freedom be taken away as a result of this?

Surely that could not be true! Had I committed some criminal act I would not have been transferred to the Soviet Army, but simply demobilised. But things were not that simple. During the past year, many had been arrested and many had disappeared without trace. Once again I recalled the crowd of visitors at Rīga Central Prison. Only Latvian could be heard in the waiting room. And I remembered Rūdis, the youngest son of a farm labourer. Rūdis, a soldier completing his compulsory military service who had

disappeared without a trace. He had no rank in the army, no association with a military academy. He had grown up in a farm labourer's family. What did this young man have in common with me? But if he had disappeared, then why not me and my fellow officers? What did it matter that most of the younger officers in our army, that is, the army of independent Latvia, had come from poor families who could not afford university fees?

My greatest immediate concern was to account for the antenna lost by my platoon. Next, but by no means less important, I had to deal with the fact that two pistols were recorded in the files against my name. This was no small matter. According to Soviet regulations, an officer could only possess one pistol (an officer in the Latvian Army could have as many as ten!). What other things should I do? What else could be used to incriminate me in the event of my arrest? After careful consideration, I could think of nothing.

First, I ordered the platoon sergeant, Stalažs, to submit a report to me stating the circumstances surrounding the loss of the antenna. Next, I wrote a report to the battalion commander requesting a new antenna. Then, I gave both reports to Sergeant Stalažs and informed him that, in the event of my arrest, these documents were to be given to the commander of the battalion. Finally, I took one of my pistols to the ammunition depot and asked them to strike it off my records. I felt that all my «transgressions» had been taken care of. «Anything else?» I asked myself. No. Nothing. My conscience was clear. I gave my home address to Sergeant Stalažs and also to the chief of the office staff, Ozols, and asked them to forward my personal belongings there in case I did not return.

Midday was approaching. I left the sergeant in charge and returned to our «quarters» in the barn. Once again the question: «Why?» tormented me.

For what reason would I and the other officers be arrested? Every fool knew that the one enemy of Latvian officers and the Latvian nation had been the Germans. This had been the case for thousands of years. Nobody had ever mentioned that we had to fear the Russians, or that the Soviet Union was our enemy. For what reason would the Soviets want to eliminate us, we who would be prepared to go into battle against the common enemy? But the questions remained forever unanswered. There was nobody with whom I could share my thoughts or doubts, not even a friend.

In the barn there was a great deal of activity.

«What's happening?» I asked.

«Don't you know? Tactical exercises for the officers. Somewhere outside the camp. Immediately.»

«Who has to go? Everyone?»

«The devil only knows! The messenger said that the officers were to assemble in front of Headquarters.»

«But today is Saturday. All exercises – without exception – must end at 1400 hours. In the past, this routine has never been changed.»

«Don't ask. We don't know any more than you. An order has been given. An order has to be obeyed. Hurry!»

«Was my name called out? Maybe I don't have to go.»

No one could answer my question.

One by one the officers left the barn. On the way to Headquarters, a few dropped into the club. Some were still hungry, some were after cigarettes, a few wanted to grab a bag of sweets.

I managed to hold back my friend Janka. Grabbing him by the arm I asked:

«Do you really believe the story about exercises? Don't you realise that the cattle wagons at Gulbene station are meant for us?»

The exercise is just an excuse to get us out of camp. They wouldn't dare arrest us here in front of the troops.»

Janka looked at me with wide eyes. In them I saw confusion and fear. He was trying to hide his feelings.

«Are we going to let them arrest us?» I asked. «Let's run! Along the riverbank. Into the forest. Maybe we could hide in the barn. In the straw. Not even the devil would find us there. Think it over, Janka. Let's do it.»

Janka had always been a reserved man. Even on this occasion he would have liked to have said nothing, but felt an obligation to answer. He shifted from foot to foot and said:

«I am taking off. But there are already three of us.»

«Take me along!»

«We can't. With a fourth it would be too dangerous.»

I could not change his mind. He hurried off towards the camp, to his companions.

I was alone in the barn. I was in an agitated state. My back was wet and sweat was pouring from my forehead. My thoughts were racing. What to do? How to escape? Behind the camp was a forest. Maybe it would be best to disappear in it? I could reach the farmhouse over the hill, change into civilian clothes and, with a spade and axe over my shoulder, pretend to be a worker. The railway station was not too far.

Suddenly, I thought of my family. While still on leave, my mother had begged me to pretend to be sick, to get a doctor's certificate, to wait and see what the future would bring.

«These are troubled times. There will be war, I know there will be war,» she had pleaded, trying to convince me. «Hide in the forest. Or with family! Don't go back to your regiment. Can't you see, there has to be a war. Things must change. Wait and see!» she had begged.

I had ignored my mother's pleas. And now, if I were to be captured escaping from camp, I knew that my parents would also be punished. I recalled the decree that I had seen in one of the daily newspapers. It had warned that, in the event of an individual trying to evade arrest, all of his relatives would be called to answer before the authorities. If my name was on the list of those to be arrested and I escaped, my parents, my brothers, my sisters would also suffer. I could not inflict this upon them. If it had still been possible to reach them, we could have all gone into hiding. But how long can a family remain in hiding? What if war did not break out soon? What would happen to the farm, the livestock in the meantime?

Endless thoughts and questions rushed through my head. But there were no answers to my dilemma. One thing was clear: my family were not to suffer because of my actions. Escaping was out of the question.

Twenty eight years have passed since that day and I still have not been able to forget this agonising soul searching. When circumstances are clearly defined, a decision is easily made. But at that moment in the barn absolutely nothing seemed clear to me. I was convinced that there would be arrests. I felt it with every nerve and fibre of my body. But I did not believe that one could predict the future in this way, to feel it through some primitive instinct. (Now I have no such doubts!) Even now, shivers run down my spine and my feet become numb and cold remembering that day.

I remember, I next took off my officer's uniform and put on a cadet's shirt and trousers. In the event of escape, I could remove the insignia and look like an ordinary person, a Russian civilian. But if I ended up in Siberia, I knew that warm underwear would

be a necessity. So I stuffed a towel, soap, and some warm underwear into a bag. Now, when I think of these events, they seem like a bad dream, the details of which are difficult to relate. But for all of these long years, these events have lingered in my mind and in my heart like inescapable black shadows. Lying on the hard bunks of the prison camps, I have relived this day over and over again, trying to picture what my life would have been like had I made a different decision in the barn on that fateful day.

Even before the day of our arrest, 14 June, I had heard rumours that our camp was surrounded by Soviet soldiers. They were not assigned to protect us from enemies outside the camp. On the contrary, they were there to prevent us from leaving the camp. Had I tried to escape through the forest and run into these guards, I would have gone no further. But then again... had I succeeded...?

Now I know that a quick death either in battle or while escaping would have been a far kinder fate than all of those terrible years spent in the hell camps of the north. After the war, large numbers of former Red Army front-line soldiers arrived in the labour camps, and right down to the last man they categorically agreed that they would have preferred to be under heavy fire in the most dangerous and precarious of front-line positions than to have spent even one day in the slave labour camps of Norilsk. Now I know that death would have been a blessing compared to the freezing conditions, the starvation, humiliation, insults, pain, despair, and existence in the shadow of death.

Once again I am in our small barn in the field of the army camp. I was convinced that we would be arrested, and probably executed. But I could see no way out. Slowly I approached the headquarters. Perhaps I could arrive late. It was possible that I had not even heard about the exercises. Yes, this last option

seemed to be the best. Even now, after thirty years, this option still seems the best. So why did I ignore my inner voice, why did I not arrive late? Then I remembered the reason: I was afraid that I would be arrested later, separated from my comrades. Taken away like Lieutenant Ozoliņš in a dishevelled state, hands tied behind his back, never to be heard of again. Maybe it would be easier together with one's friends.

Slowly, but trembling with fear like a rabbit crawling into the open jaws of a gigantic snake, I walked towards headquarters. The officers were standing in line. The doors of the headquarters opened. Out of Headquarters stepped the commander of the regiment, Colonel Ābelītis, followed by Commissar Smirnov and a number of Russians whom I had never seen before.

My arrival seemed to go unnoticed, as if I had not been expected. Had I arrived five minutes later, they would have already been on their way. To my surprise, the command given was simply for us to climb into the waiting trucks. No one checked the number of officers present. Without fail when going on exercises, the commanding officer had always checked the number of officers present. Was this an indication that my suspicions had been well founded?

The convoy of trucks left the camp. Along the road we met Lieutenant Bojārs from a neighbouring regiment who, on his afternoon off, was out riding his motorcycle.

«Where to?» he asked.

«To exercises,» someone replied.

«I'll come with you,» he shouted back and the lieutenant followed the trucks. He was one of the first to perish at the labour camps of Norilsk.

We were travelling at a fair pace. To my surprise it seemed as if none of my colleagues suspected anything out of the ordinary.

Or perhaps they had their suspicions but were hiding their alarm. Perhaps in my agitated state I simply misunderstood them. Surely they were aware of what was happening. But then Vitolds began to sing «Nu ardievu, Vidzemīte» («Goodbye, dear Vidzeme¹»). Everyone joined in. Would they be singing with such gusto if they knew that they were being driven to their own funeral, their own grave? The singing continued and became louder and louder.

Then the trucks stopped, and so did the singing.

«Out of the trucks!»

«Line up!»

«Forward march!»

We proceeded across a field towards the forest. I was in the last truck and found myself at the tail-end of our column. Behind me was the lieutenant commander of the second battalion, a Russian. I've forgotten his name, but he was such a repulsive, unpleasant character that even today I would have no trouble recognising him. From time to time he shouted: «Faster, faster!»

A narrow path led us to the forest. We were commanded to march in pairs. We reached a clearing. It was surrounded by young bushy fir trees, a few deciduous trees, and a little further away, a forest of older fir trees. This scene, this romantic corner of the forest, this field has forever been burned into my memory.

After the march in the hot June sun, the coolness of the forest enveloped us and we eagerly breathed in the pleasantly pungent aroma of the fir trees. The assistant commander of the regiment, a Finn called Partala, turned to face us.

«Stop!» he commanded. «First row to the left, second to the right!»

¹ Vidzeme – a region of Latvia.

But even before his command had rung out in the forest, we heard a ferocious roar: «Hands up!»

I was in the left row, facing some fir trees which were at most a metre or a metre and a half tall; suddenly these trees seemed to surround the field like an impenetrable brick wall.

Simultaneously with the disgusting command of «Hands up!», a row of dark skinned faces with narrow eyes, wide cheekbones, and jet black hair rose above the wall of trees. Their heads were covered by army caps. On the left pocket of their filthy and oil stained uniforms was the badge of the Young Communist League and decorations for good marksmanship. Hundreds of rifle barrels and bayonets were pointed at us.

A young lieutenant in the uniform of the Soviet Army emerged from the forest. He pointed a Nagan revolver at my chest. With his left hand he unbuckled my belt and shoulder strap. My pistol and belt fell to the ground. He unbuttoned the top pockets of my uniform and emptied the contents on the ground. He emptied my other pockets. Then he frisked me. The only pockets that remained untouched were the back pockets of my trousers. Maybe he had forgotten about these, maybe he did not know they existed. The money in these pockets remained untouched.

On the ground lay my bag with the cigarettes, towel, soap, and warm underwear. The lieutenant was very agitated. The hand holding his revolver was shaking. His index finger trembled on the trigger.

I have a reputation for not keeping my cool; only rarely have I succeeded in doing so. But standing with my hands above my head, I felt an immense calm. Coolly and calmly, I observed everything happening around me. The rifle barrels pointed at me. The fear and tension in the faces of their owners. The revolver in the lieutenant's trembling hand.

«This is how your life will end, Arvīd,» I said to myself. And, as if in a film, my life flashed before my eyes. I saw again my parents' struggle and sacrifice to secure my primary and secondary education. I saw the years of my military service. Admission to the Academy. The graduation ball. And my silent, distant dream of studying at the French Military Academy. My humble beginnings had not stopped me from becoming an officer. With tears in my eyes I kissed my parents' work-calloused hands and saw the grief-stricken and tearful face of my mother.

Five minutes is an eternity; ten minutes, infinity. That had been my motto during training. In five minutes a soldier can accomplish a lot, I had always said. And now, in these last five minutes, I had been disarmed, searched, my belongings confiscated. I had relived my life, walked down all its roads and remembered my loved ones. And time seemed to stretch into eternity.

After being disarmed, we were marched into the forest. We were surrounded by tanks with their motors running. Was this to muffle the sound of shots? Was I to be shot and buried in this ditch like a dog? But I was mistaken. The Russians took our names, date and place of birth, our rank. Then we were ordered to stand up.

«Hands behind your backs!» someone shouted. In pairs, surrounded on all sides by our captors, we were marched to the road.

On this day we heard for the first time the commands which we were to hear day in, day out during the long years of our imprisonment:

«Obey my commands! Keep to the road, no lagging behind! A step to the left, a step to the right means an escape attempt! The guards will shoot without warning!»

Covered trucks were waiting on the road. We were pushed in, one against the other, legs, arms, and ribs breaking. Commander

Ābelītis had been pushed against me. He was a large man. I wondered whether I would be able to bear his weight for long. But under extreme conditions even the impossible becomes endurable. The trucks were driven along back roads, through the forest. It was still necessary to hide this «exercise» from the eyes of the local people. The journey seemed endless. Then the trucks stopped, the doors opened, and we were ordered to disembark. We crawled out of the trucks, arms and legs numb. Commander Ābelītis could hardly move. His face was flushed, dripping with perspiration. The journey had placed an enormous strain on his heart.

We were assembled by the railway line in front of the locked doors of cattle wagons. The windows had bars. We were herded into the wagons in great haste. If anyone lagged, he was hurried along with a shove in the back with the butt end of a rifle.

Finally, our wagon was crammed to capacity. Quickly, quickly, the doors were slammed shut and locked. Double bunks lined each end of the wagon. In the centre, a small area of open space. The toilet was a hole in the floor.

Those forced into the wagon first had climbed onto the bunks. There was hardly enough room for the rest of us in the open space. The bunks had only recently been constructed. Traces of excrement on the floor told us that the previous cargo of the wagon had been horses.

The door opened. Our names were recorded. We were asked to appoint a spokesman for our wagon. Again the door was slammed shut. The only view of the outside world was through the bars of a small window. Those who could see through it told us that we were at Gulbene station.

During all the years following these events, I have had to recall an episode which took place at Gulbene station. During the night

the door of our wagon had been opened. Russian guards stood outside. By the light of a lantern a Russian officer had tried to read three names from a list. One of these names sounded very much like mine: Lansmanis, Laukmanis, or something similar. Three men were taken from our wagon. They did not return. This episode is very important because on the following day at Rīga station when our names were checked against a list by new guards, some confusion arose. To make sure that no one was hiding under the bunks and that the floor, walls, and window had not been damaged, the guards ordered us to stand at one end of the wagon. As each name was called out, that person moved to the opposite side. My name had not been called out! Yesterday, at Gulbene, my name had been recorded, today it was not on the list. Was I to have been one of the three prisoners released from the wagon on the previous night? All these years this incident has occupied my thoughts.

I remained in the corner near the door. I could not be seen by the guards. Everyone else had moved to the opposite side. The guard yelled:

«Anyone else?»

«Yes,» I answered.

The guards were very surprised. They turned to where I was standing.

«What is your surname?»

I told them. The leader searched the list for my name, again and again asking me to repeat it.

«I cannot find this name on the list! Repeat it again!» he shouted. Again he examined the list asking the other guards to help him. Finally they found it.

«Here it is! But it has been crossed out and marked «released!»

My knowledge of Russian was not very good, but I had picked up enough from the Russian officers, military police, and compulsory Russian language lessons to understand what was happening.

Not certain what action to take, they announced:

«We will clarify this matter.»

I was told to join the others at the opposite end of the wagon.

Everyone realised what was happening and told me to ask for my freedom. I asked the spokesman of our wagon, who could speak Russian, to speak on my behalf. The chief guard barked out again in Russian:

«We will clarify this matter!»

They moved on to the next wagon. Everyone in the wagon agreed that, during the night, someone had been released in my place. There had been a misunderstanding. The mistake had only been discovered in Rīga. I would be released immediately.

Then, someone pulled out a short pencil stub, someone else a piece of paper. Many hurriedly wrote down the addresses of their next of kin. When there was no more room on the paper, they wrote on cigarette packs. I was asked to memorise the names of all the prisoners in the wagon in case I either lost the paper or it was confiscated by the guards. The atmosphere in the wagon was one of alarm. Each man tried to press closer to me than the others, so that I would notice and remember him.

Everyone was convinced that the doors would open. That I, Lasmanis, would be released. That I would convey the sad news of their fate to their mothers, fathers, wives, families, and friends. Suddenly, the sound of a whistle rang out shrilly. The train began to move. Perhaps they were simply shunting the echelon to a side track – out of sight of the eyes of passengers who were not

supposed to see this train and its cargo. But the train did not stop. From the window we caught a glimpse of the people who had heard about the sad fate of the arrested officers and had come to farewell us.

I still had not lost hope of being released when the train stopped at Daugavpils. But it was precisely here that all my hopes evaporated. On arrival we saw seven other echelons of cattle wagons crammed full of arrested Latvians. On the tracks immediately next to us, the wagons were crammed full of women and children. Clearly, a mass deportation of Latvians to Siberia was taking place.

Siberia. A name so often mentioned. Siberia and its labour camps; these two concepts are inseparable in the minds of all Latvians. Soon we reached the Latvian-Russian border. In our thoughts we said goodbye to our country and our dear ones. We sang «God bless Latvia», independent Latvia's national anthem, and some other patriotic songs. The wagon fell silent. The same questions must have filled the thoughts of each person: Where are we being taken? Why have I been arrested? How will this journey end?

We were not long in Russian territory when the train came to a halt. We were given bread, butter, and sugar. This was our welcome, the famous Russian hospitality. The food was handed out to us in its original wrappings. All were the products of Latvia.

Smolensk. Vitebsk. Station followed station. Hours, days, nights passed. Our journey seemed endless. Our bodies ached from sleeping on bare boards. From time to time we were given food. Black bread. Water. Less often, a few grains of sugar, a piece of salty fish.

The officers in our wagon were a varied lot. There were some who had graduated in the same year as I had, others earlier or

later. There were some older men who had trained the officer candidates at the Military Academy, they must have been nearing 40 years of age. Then there were the really old men, the lieutenant colonels. All branches of the forces were represented and all had been reduced to the same misery. Nevertheless, we maintained our respect for rank. The bunks were allocated to the higher ranking officers, the space on the floor near the bunks to the lieutenants. The older men were allowed to sit near the window; they needed more fresh air. Whenever one of these older men had to give up his place by the window, for example, to take care of his «business» at the hole in the floor, this place was unfailingly returned to him. Even the rations were given to the older officers first, even though the younger ones were hungrier. There were no arguments about this state of affairs.

It turned out that not all of us had been arrested in the forest. Some had been taken from their homes. There were those who had even been pulled from hospital beds. Others had been allowed to bring a suitcase, blankets, a change of underwear, and food. There were those who shared their provisions. Others, mainly the older officers, were saving these things for later. I remember Lieutenant Colonel M-, who had taken up position at the window. One night, a loaf of bread fell from his bag onto the floor near where Janka and I were sleeping. In the dark, I could feel this loaf of bread with my hands. Struggling against our hunger, we forced ourselves not to eat it. When we returned the loaf of bread, this old «bird» took it indifferently, barely giving it a second glance, not even rewarding our honesty with a single crumb. Later it turned out that such hoarded food often became old and mouldy. These hoarders were the same people who could be seen guiltily trying to drop their mouldy bread into the toilet ditch at

Krasnoyarsk without being observed. And all this when the younger officers were feeling the first effects of starvation.

At this stage of our ordeal it was hard to understand such selfish behaviour. Later, it surprised no-one. Every old inmate of the labour camps can tell of a hunger so great that even the most firmly entrenched beliefs are abandoned and forgotten, when he finds himself unable to share his food even with his closest friend. Very few can claim that this has not been true of themselves. But such egoistic behaviour is understandable when, all around you, prisoners are dropping dead one by one from starvation.

Nevertheless, the motto «one for all and all for one» should not have been forgotten. We had been taught this at the Military Academy. The older officers should have been the first to help their younger colleagues. Many of the older officers lost the respect of the younger officers for this very reason.

The train pulled into Babinino station. Not once had we been let off the train since being loaded into the wagons at Gulbene station. The order came to disembark. Exhausted and weak, we were happy to inhale the fresh summer air. We marched the 30 kilometres to the camp at Yuhnovo in two columns. Someone mentioned that this place had once been the home of the Russian writer Turgenev. At the camp we noticed that the timber huts had been recently built. Polish writing on the walls told us that prisoners of war from Poland had recently been incarcerated here.

The weather was warm and sunny. Even the nights were not cold. We were divided into groups of 100 men, each with an appointed leader. These groups were divided into yet smaller groups. Next to our own camp I remember that there was a camp housing only civilians. All of the prisoners there were Latvians who had been arrested and deported on the same day as we had been.

Probably the inmates of the cattle wagons we had seen near at Daugavpils.

Estonian and Lithuanian officers had also been sent to Yuhново camp. All together there must have been about 1,500 officers from the three Baltic states. One could observe clear differences in the behaviour of the officers of the three Baltic countries. The Lithuanians were very loud, noisy. They always seemed to be arguing, especially when food was being distributed. Their behaviour was quite informal, not at all what one would have expected from an officer. The Lithuanians adapted to camp conditions more readily than the others and, as a result, more of them survived. Many of the Lithuanian officers spoke Russian.

The Estonian officers were the complete opposite of our southern neighbours. The Estonians had suffered the most. Not only had their pistols, belts, and other military articles been confiscated, but even the buttons on their uniforms had been cut off. Yet, their military bearing was exemplary. Strict army discipline was maintained. They were enraged about the treacherous circumstances of their arrest and maintained this rage until death. Few spoke Russian and then only with a heavy accent. It seemed to me that they hoped to be released soon and deliberately did not adapt to the conditions at the labour camps. Although few actively resisted being driven out to work, fewer still actually did any work. As a result, their rations were cut to a minimum. As expectations of release became more and more remote, the Estonians lost all hope. Proportionally, a greater number of Estonian officers left their bones in the tundra.

The behaviour of the Latvians fell somewhere in between that of their two neighbours. The Latvians were quieter and displayed more self-control than the Lithuanians. However, their

individuality, egoism, and concern for the self was apparent from the first days in the camp.

YUחנוVO – BABININO – KRASNOYARSK

On the morning of 22 June, the German army attacked the Soviet Union, thus beginning its Eastern offensive. We had been prisoners for 8 days. Each day in the camp the news had been broadcast over the loudspeakers; this is how we heard about Hitler's attack. On that particular day, the broadcast was abruptly cut off. The camp was readied for evacuation.

One evening, surrounded by mounted guards and foot-soldiers with dogs, we were marched away from Yuhnovo camp. The horses trotted up and down on each side of the column; the riders seemed to be as small and scruffy as their horses. The march stretched on into the night. At sun rise we reached Babinino station. The officers were herded into a large empty barn. Even when the barn was already crammed full of men, the guards kept forcing the remaining hundred or so prisoners into the barn, urging them forward with the butts of their rifles. Body pressed against body. It was impossible to sit down. Difficult even to breathe. Our arms and legs became numb. The hours spent in that barn were ones of unremitting agony. Finally, we were released from the barn and allowed to sit in a field near the railway line. We watched many trains carrying tanks and cannons speeding by. To our surprise these trains were not heading west to the front with Germany, but east. A few thought they might be heading to fight the Japanese who were the allies of the Germans.

At dusk we were herded into the cattle wagons. This time we set off in the direction of Moscow. The train stopped at some

small Moscow station where we saw anti-aircraft balloons floating above the city. After that, the train did not break its journey again, but was constantly rushing eastwards. I have pleasant memories of one night of this journey. I spent most of it at the window. The night was a very short one. Darkness set in late and the sun rose early. Through the bars of the window I saw stations, fields, forests, and people in dirty padded jackets. The countryside overwhelmed me with its beauty. I was surprised by the vast fields which were so different from the Latvian countryside. Birch groves, forests, hills, valleys, rivers, swamps, lakes, farms surrounded by paddocks, and fields of crops all slipped past the train.

It seemed to me that Russia should have been a prosperous country with an abundance of bread, meat, and milk. Why was this not so? How could the poverty which the citizens of Russia were experiencing be explained? We had learned of this grinding poverty from members of the occupation forces as well as from civilians we had met along our journey.

The heat was unbearable, especially between Moscow and Krasnoyarsk. Rations were meagre: bread was handed out once a day. One day we were given salted fish which we ate with the bread. There was no drinking water. I remember that that day was an unbelievably hot one, and we had become very thirsty. When the train pulled into a station, the guards began fetching water from a nearby stream, two buckets per wagon. They had almost reached our wagon when the whistle sounded. The train began to move. We did not get our water. Our lips were chapped, our tongues parched, and our heads ached from the extreme heat and our thirst.

Another scene through the bars: A group of women harvesting crops, guarded by a man with a rifle. Wooden huts surrounded by

barbed wire could be seen close to the railway line, and the same sort of wooden huts further away.

My friend Janka suggested that we could make an escape from the moving train by cutting a hole in the floor of the wagon and then lowering ourselves onto the tracks. The train would pass over us.

«Janka! It's too late to think of escape. Where were your ideas of escape when we were at Litene? You didn't listen to me when I tried to convince you not to go to staff headquarters but to disappear into the forest!»

Later, in the camps, there were others who spoke to me of escape. Once a Czech chemical engineer tried to convince me to attempt an escape with him. A few days later, I saw his body dumped at the camp gates beaten beyond recognition. The guards had left him there as a warning.

THE TRANSIT CAMP AT KRASNOYARSK. OUR FIRST DAY AT CAMP

Among the memories of the couple of weeks spent at Krasnoyarsk is one of our march to the bath-house. We were dressed in army uniforms. Many were in the uniform of the Red Army. Along the way we were followed by a mob of teenagers. They threw stones and yelled at us in Russian. Those who understood said it was abuse. We deserved to be locked up, they shouted, for not fighting against the Germans.

One evening we were ordered to load cement onto barges in the Yenisey harbour near the camp. The harbour was encircled by barbed wire. There were guards in the towers. Some of our

group were carrying sacks of cement from the sheds to the barges. Others had noticed that our supervisors had disappeared and made use of their absence to explore the barges and the sheds. I was one of them. We found some bags of wheat in a corner of a barge. Janka and I hid behind these bags, made holes in them and ate as much of the grain as we could manage. The night was dark. We could see the lit-up guard towers. Waves were crashing against the shore. Janka again brought up the subject of escape. We would only have to crawl along the river bank. Perhaps we could make a hole in the barbed wire which must surely end at some point in the river. Perhaps we could swim around the barbed wire. But what then? The sopping wet and torn uniforms would be a dead give-away. Also, not knowing the language or the geography of the district... it would be foolish to dream of success.

FROM KRASNOYARSK TO DUDINKA

One day we were marched to the Yenisey harbour and herded onto a barge. Our accommodation was on the lowest level of the barge. We were only able to lie on the floor like sardines. In one corner was a large tub; this was the toilet. Those on duty had to scoop the faeces and urine from the tub, and carry it in buckets to be tipped over the side of the barge into the river.

Only a few rays of daylight shone down through the hatches. The air was foul. We did not know our destination. Some became ill. There were many cases of dysentery: the prisoners' curse. The lives of many would be cut short due to dysentery epidemics. To keep a record of the number of days spent on the barge, some of the prisoners cut notches into a stick.

DUDINKA

The barge arrived at Dudinka. We disembarked and then were marched to the railway station for further transportation to Norilsk. At Dudinka we were given a large piece of bread each. I still remember the pleasure this fresh, tasty piece of rye bread gave me as it eased my hunger. There is little else that I remember of Dudinka: the dirty streets, people dressed in dirty padded jackets, the usual wooden huts surrounded by the usual barbed wire fences.

NORILSK

On the morning of 10 August, the train reached Norilsk. The night before had been a very difficult one. We had travelled in open goods wagons. There were no seats. The first men to board the train had sat down on the floor leaving no place for the rest of us to sit. We had no choice but to squat on the knees of the others. Guards with rifles kept pushing more prisoners into the wagon. If anyone tried to stand up to stretch or change position, the guards threatened to shoot. In the middle of the night we were allowed one short toilet break. We found it difficult to move because our arms and legs were so numb. Barely a few minutes later, the train began to move again. Most of us were in our summer uniforms and had felt cold even at the start of the journey. As we headed further north, the weather became increasingly bitter. My teeth were chattering. By morning many were sure to have developed pneumonia.

I did not know then that summer here began only in mid-July and that by 25 August it could already be snowing. The start of a bitterly long, cold winter.

Many times I had read about the «white nights», and now I was witnessing them. The sun, although not as bright as during the day, shone in all its glory. But what use was that, when everyone below it was freezing to death.

Around us, a vast plain stretched as far as the eye could see ending somewhere near the foot of distant mountains. Stunted fir and birch trees dotted the plain. There were no houses, only the huts of railway guards and prison camps. The horizon was formed by the silhouette of a mountain range. There seemed to be no end to the vastness. What was our destination? What role would we play in this distant part of the world? How would this depressing journey end? Would we ever return to our homes in our now so distant small country? Perhaps our lives would end here in the tundra. The latter seemed more likely. We who had committed no crime against the Soviet Union would not have been sent so far away from our homeland had we been meant to survive and return.

The distance from Dudinka to Norilsk is only 120 kilometres. Even though we had been travelling all night, the end of the journey seemed no nearer. We were frozen and our hands and feet were numb, I could no longer feel mine. How long were we to suffer? Then we were at the foot of a mountain. It was covered by snow. There was little vegetation. The railway line curved around the side of this mountain and Norilsk came into view.

It was already late morning when our train came to a stop. To our right, we saw the huge mountain and, next to it, another one just as large. Between these two mountains and a third lay deep valleys. Next to the railway line was a shed for coal. Behind the shed lay a prison camp surrounded by two barbed wire fences. To the left, more huts, more barbed wire. We could see some figures inside the fence. Our prison mates?

The coal mines must have been near, because everything the eye could see was covered with gray dust. This corner of the world seemed so black and dreary. Only the sky was clear and blue, and the sun shone just as brightly as it did in our homeland.

We were ordered out of the wagons, lined up and counted over and over again. Then just to be sure, we were counted again. Finally we began to move. We were not taken to the camp near the railway, but marched towards the town. Houses, many decorated with Russian wood carvings around the windows, lined both sides of the street. We saw men, women, and children, the free citizens of the town. Then we stopped. A column of prisoners crossed our path. They looked worn out and exhausted, but they observed us with great interest. The free citizens also stopped. What a sight we must have been. About 1500 healthy young men in uniform, still in good condition even after two months of imprisonment. We marched at a slow steady pace, our backs were not yet bent and our heads were still held high.

This was our first march through the town with our guards. In just a few weeks and months, after countless such trips, what a different sight we would make. Our heads hanging helplessly on our chests, bowed in quiet desperation. Our backs would be bent, our step would have lost its spring. Feet, hands, and faces would be swollen. Others would be walking skeletons. Our cheeks, chins, and noses would be covered with unhealed sores from the extreme cold. Our feet clad only in rags beginning to smell because of the festering ulcers on our toes and heels from frostbite. A feeling of indifference, of unspeakable apathy, an unconquerable weakness and exhaustion would overwhelm the men who today were still so strong in body and spirit. In agony they would drag their feet and stumble over each small stone on the road. The

eyes, which now with interest observed the foreign town and its people, would lose their spark of life. These eyes would only begin to glimmer at the sight of a free citizen carrying a loaf of bread. Every night dreams would be of bread, and every waking thought of how good it would be to eat just one small crust. Only a few months would pass, and many of these young men would no longer be amongst the living. In a year, only half of us would still be alive. In three years, only a couple of hundred.

After the difficult journey, the freezing and overcrowded conditions, we received a pleasant surprise. We were taken to a communal bath-house which had hot water. Without this trip to the bath-house, we would have surely developed pneumonia.

From the bath-house we were marched to our Camp No. 7. Many of the huts were only half built. There was no heating or lighting. In the grounds of the camp, the roadways and paths had yet to be built. There was a lot of mud. The only parts of the camp to have been finished were the double barbed wire fence and the guard towers. These were well lit. Only a few hours after leaving the train we had reached our destination, our new «residence». At the gates we were ordered to hand over our money and all valuables: watches, cigarette cases, rings. Many actually did hand over their valuables, but others, including myself, gave up nothing. I did not have much: a watch which had stopped during the journey, a mirror, a comb, a cigarette case, a dustcoat, and 900 roubles. Some of the money I gave to a friend, Peter Ermansons, the rest I hid behind the collar of my shirt and in the cuffs of my trousers.

I do not remember how all of that money disappeared. It was not stolen from me. Most probably was spent on bread. In the beginning the price of a portion of bread was extremely high, 30 roubles! Later, when most of our money had been spent on food or tobacco, the

price fell to 10 roubles. Neither my watch nor my dustcoat brought me any money. The watch I lost because of my own incredible stupidity. I gave it to a Russian, a mine-worker, who promised to sell it to his foreman for me. Later, the Russian told me that there had been a terrible accident at the mine. That both the foreman and the watch had perished. The coat I gave to a friend from high school and the Academy, who promised to sell it for me. After a couple of days this friend (a renowned wheeler and dealer at the camp) told me that the coat had been confiscated by the camp guards. More likely my «friend» had filled his own stomach with the proceeds of the sale of that coat. Everyone who knew him thought as much.

The first search at the gate had not been tough. Perhaps this was planned so that later, in the camp, the guards themselves could take possession of any items not confiscated. In many cases precisely this took place. The prisoners had even been issued with receipts for their valuables. But only a few years later, I saw the silver cigarette cases of officers of the Baltic states being melted down in order to make electrical contact fittings. Perhaps these were only the cigarette cases of those officers who had perished. The foreman at the workshop, a soldier of the Revolution and an ardent communist, showed me these cigarette cases but could tell me no more about them.

THE CAMP

During the first couple of weeks we were not taken outside of the camp to work, but spent it in so-called «quarantine». We were given a camp uniform consisting of a shirt, light trousers, a padded jacket, and canvas boots with a rubber sole which began to fall off within a couple of days of wearing them. On rainy days, the boots

were saturated within an hour. We were also given long black bags made of cotton, without any filling, to sleep on. These sleeping bags remained empty for many months until, bit by bit, we managed to scrounge wood-shavings from our work place to fill them.

One morning, we were taken outside the camp to work. To our horror we discovered that the soles of the canvas boots had been nailed on with sharp nails; these protruded and jabbed into the soles of our feet. Marching in rows of five, with our hands behind our backs, we were not allowed to adjust our clothing. And of course nobody was allowed to lag behind.

I remember those first days at the camp. The weather was good, and the sun smiled down from the blue northern sky. In fact, I will always remember the clear skies of the north with fondness. That and those few happy moments when one was able to get an extra portion of bread to appease the never ending hunger. It is moments such as these, together with those in which the end seemed near, which will stay in my memory forever. I do not speak of heavily overcast skies on rainy days, but of the endless, clear, sunshine-filled blue sky. Even when I was weak from hunger, covered in lice and bed bug bites, exhausted by hard work, hardly able to drag my feet, in my heart I could not stop the feeling of exultation at seeing that blue sky, beautiful beyond description, vaulting over the valley of death that was Norilsk.

Maybe the sky above Norilsk left this impression on me because, by contrast, everything else was grey, drab and repulsive. The sky gave hope to my imprisoned soul. I remember many occasions when my eyes automatically turned towards the clear sky and its never-ending blueness. It seemed to become mistier and dimmer beyond the mountains across the tundra. It gave the soul such peace, comfort, and a brief moment of respite.

On our first day of work, we were ordered to clear a band of scrub for the proposed road. With interest I observed the mass of human beings in motion around me. This scene reminded me of autumn in my homeland, when neighbours gathered to help one another to harvest their crops.

The first day at work was followed by countless such days. Soon we would become as black and dirty as the prisoners we had seen at Krasnoyarsk and on the first day at Norilsk. Dressed in rags, with expressionless faces giving no hint of either sorrow, despair, or suffering. Apathetic beings, devoid of all feeling. How could it be otherwise? What reason was there to believe that one day we would be set free? In spirit we had already said goodbye to our loved ones, our friends, and to freedom.

Was there a way out? Maybe one could find a way to escape this impossible situation? But there was no way out. Barbed wire and guards, guards, guards and more barbed wire. When one has lost all hope, one will clutch at even a straw. I have read a story about a prisoner who felt the insurmountable wish to change into a mouse and to escape through a mouse-hole. I myself have made this same sort of illogical wish. One day when working in the open tundra, I imagined that a squadron of war planes would at any moment appear in the clear blue sky above and save us. Later, I had to laugh about such foolish hopes.

THE INTERROGATION

Our arrests had taken place between the 14 and 16 June, 1941. None of us was guilty of any crime. Although the law clearly stated that no citizen could be arrested without the permission

and order of the prosecutor, none of our arrests had in fact been sanctioned by the public prosecutor. It was not clear who had been responsible for ordering the arrests of June, 1941. But what was clear to us was that there was not even the remotest chance of escaping the hell of Norilsk.

The treatment meted out to us was the same as for the prisoners who had been tried and sentenced, who knew not only why they were here, but also the length of their sentence. But this situation was soon rectified. The grim days of the interrogations began. While some were taken to KGB headquarters, the rest were interrogated in the guard house next to the camp. A state of alarm arose amongst the prisoners. These interrogations were extremely savage. The prisoner was forced to sign fabricated accusations. A refusal to sign meant a brutal beating. Soon the camp was full of prisoners with black eyes and bruises. A friend from the Academy, Francis Misiņš, suffered particularly severely. Dressed only in his underwear, he was placed in an unfinished prison cell which had no roof or floor. Even though he tried to exercise and jump around to keep warm, he suffered from the effects of exposure to the point of collapse. Although he was a well-built young man, the interrogation had been too much to bear. He returned to the camp beaten and bruised and could not leave his bunk for many days.

I was taken to interrogation unprepared. None of my friends could give me advice about what to say, or how to act. The older prisoners thought it beneath their dignity to advise the newcomers.

One morning the guard ordered me to remain in the barrack. Everyone knew that this meant interrogation. I was not mistaken. Around lunchtime I was led away to the guard house, where I was taken into a narrow room. A captain sat behind a table. He began questioning me in Russian. Although I could understand the

questions about name, address, and rank, I could not understand any of his other questions because I did not speak Russian. This enraged my interrogator. He began to swear, pulled out his revolver, threatening to shoot. Although this did nothing to improve my knowledge of Russian, my interrogator continued to rant and rave. Then he began to talk more slowly and I understood a little of what he was trying to say. He told me that, as I was not to be released, I could stop pretending. But I was unable to understand any of his other questions. Even if I could have guessed what they were, I would not have been able to answer them. The captain flew into a rage and pushed the revolver into my face. He repeated the same sentence about five times. I had a notion of what he was saying:

«If you don't speak, I shall call you for interrogation in 20 years time! By then you will speak perfect Russian. That is, if you are still alive.»

He screamed, pushed the door to the corridor open, grabbed me by the throat and slammed me against the wall. I lost consciousness.

I came to in the corridor. My head was pounding and extremely painful. The guards ordered me to stand up. Then I was taken back to the camp. This was the first day of my interrogation. The next day I returned to work. After a few days I fell ill. I had a high temperature and was given permission to remain in the barrack for the day. I was happy about my illness as it meant sleep and a rest from hard labour. After breakfast, I was just beginning to doze off pleasantly when Lieutenant Colonel Spalviņš began pulling me by the leg. One of the guards was waiting for me. Yes, the animal was standing there, using abusive language, ordering me to dress.

Once again I was taken to the terrible house of interrogation opposite the gates of the camp. Once again I found myself standing in the same room as I had done one week previously. This time a lieutenant sat behind the table. After establishing that I did not speak or understand Russian, he called for an interpreter, one of the prisoners at the camp, Lieutenant Colonel Bērziņš.

The interrogator explained calmly that, since no-one could be kept at the camp without having been convicted, establishing my guilt was a mere formality. Our task for the day was to draw up a statement of the offence for which I was to be convicted.

What was I guilty of? I was here only because of a misunderstanding. I explained how I had gone on manoeuvres at Litene of my own accord. Had I arrived five minutes later, I explained, I would not even be here. I told him how at the station in Rīga my name had already been crossed from the list of arrested people and marked «released».

The interpreter calmly translated my story. The interrogator listened even more calmly. Then he began to speak, a friendly smile on his face. He explained that he understood me, believed me, and felt sorry for me. Offering me a cigarette he continued:

«I have already told you, I cannot keep anyone at the camp without a conviction, therefore you shall be convicted. The statement must be signed today. If this is not done, you will be called in front of the captain who interrogated you last week. You would not want to meet with him again. Tomorrow, I leave on assignment, so let us begin now. We must come up with some small matter. We must show that there was something you did not like about the Soviet system. You will receive a sentence of two to four months. By then the war will have ended. You will be able to return to Latvia and resume your life and career in the army.

Actually, you are not a prisoner, but are merely interned for the duration of the war.»

The lieutenant was in no hurry. He continued to smoke and offered a cigarette to the interpreter and me. He pointed out that, if I had to face my first interrogator, the captain, again, the consequences could be disastrous. Then he, the man who held my fate in his hands, began writing the statement.

«You did not like the Soviet system because of the price increases?» asked the interrogator.

«The prices went down and my wages went up after the occupation! As I am a single man, I was mostly concerned about having good food and a few drinks. While in the Latvian army my pay was 235 lats per month, under the Soviets it was 650 roubles. Brandy and food at the staff canteen were cheaper after occupation. I was actually happy about the decrease in the prices and have no complaints about this.»

The interrogator seemed bewildered, but then with a smile asked:

«But the boots, they were more expensive?»

In my innocence I stated the facts as they had been. While an enlisted soldier, I had bought my first pair of boots for 16 lats, the second pair for 19. After graduating from the Academy, I ordered the most expensive boots, they cost me 55 lats. I didn't know the price of boots in 1941, but I had seen them in the shops starting at 400 roubles a pair.

The interrogator's response was:

«Nobody is happy about rising prices, so naturally, you were not pleased either. Therefore we shall enter on your statement: I did not like the high price of boots. Next question: You did not like the collective farms, is this true?»

I replied:

«There were no collective farms where I lived, therefore I cannot express an opinion about them. The question of liking or disliking them never arose!»

«You did not like the nationalisation of private property?»

«As I did not own any property, there was nothing of mine to nationalise. Nobody in my family is wealthy and nothing was taken from them.»

«But on the whole you did not like to see the hard earned property of others being taken away from them,» the lieutenant continued.

«Naturally I do not like to see the hard earned possessions of ordinary honest people taken from them.»

«Yes, let's record this on the statement as well. You have said nothing bad, only stated the truth,» the lieutenant was satisfied and continued to write. Then we talked amicably about other matters. I do not remember the details. He reminded me a few more times about my fate were I to fall into the clutches of my first interrogator, and consoled me that I would not spend more than three to six months at Norilsk. Then he asked me to come to the table, read the statement, and sign it.

I did not believe that I would spend only three to six months at Norilsk. None of the old prisoners had sentences of less than 8 to 15 years. Once, someone had heard of a prisoner sentenced to a 5-year term. Even after serving out the sentence, one could be held at the camp indefinitely. The ones among us who understood Russian had dragged such information from the old prisoners with much interest.

How can I explain the fact that I signed this fabricated statement without offering resistance? The camp was full of prisoners

with broken ribs, and bruised faces and bodies. Also, during the three months spent at the camp, the knowledge I had acquired had wiped out all hope of justice in this corner of the world. I had been arrested by accident. My name did not appear on the list. According to the list, there were 70 prisoners, while actually there were 71. The presence of this extra person had not concerned anyone. We had no rights and no protection under the law. We were considered lower than animals, whom the master could treat as mercilessly as he pleased. Did our captors not realise that the prisoners, all highly educated people, would perish if kept in a state of starvation? Of course they did. We were neither the first nor the last group of deportees with highly specialised skills to pass through the hands of these heartless monsters. Thousands of us perished. Death was a normal, everyday occurrence which they perhaps even welcomed and enjoyed. The experiences and knowledge gained during the last three months in the camp had convinced me that there was nothing to gain by refusing to sign the fabricated statement. I would have been beaten, perhaps even killed. This would have been the end of my struggle for justice.

The interrogations continued all through autumn. Sentencing took place on Christmas Day. Without a trial, witnesses, or evidence, our sentences had been decided in Moscow, thousands of kilometres from Norilsk. Most of us were sentenced to 10 years, some to 8 and 7 years, and a few to «only» 6. Christmas, that year, was on a Sunday. I do not remember if it was 1941 or 1942, but I do remember our surprise at not being marched out to work on that day. Soon the reason became clear: our sentence papers had to be signed. By this time many of our comrades were no longer with us, and others were in poor health as a result of the abominable conditions at the camp. The blow of being arrested without

reason, the cruel interrogations, and longing for home and dear ones had been too much for some. During the first autumn, many had perished. If this rate of death was to continue, it would not be long before we would all be gone.

My sentence was «only» 7 years. The question remained: For what crime? Once the sentences had been announced, we were considered «fully fledged» convicts, «zeks». We were no longer protected from the old prisoners, the criminals, bandits, and re-offenders. Until now we had only been able to meet with them secretly to exchange information and to trade our meagre possessions. Soon even the fence separating the two zones of the camp was dismantled.

Later we heard that the ones taken for interrogation at KGB headquarters had fared much worse than the others. Many were taken, but none returned to the camp. We did meet a few of them later at the nickel works and in the mines, but what had happened to the others? In the spring of 1944 I was taken to the same KGB prison for interrogation, and it was here that I learned the answer. Sharing a cell with six or seven thieves, a couple of them knew what had happened to the officers. In the late spring of 1942, they told me, the officers had been shot. One evening, when the food containers had been brought to the cells, the prisoners had been told to eat as much as they liked, that they could get even more food.

«This is my sixth time in prison, but I remember this evening well because I gorged down so much food that I felt sick. That night, the prison was very empty and very quiet. It was clear that your friends were no longer amongst the living.»

The criminals even told how the executions had been carried out. Forced to walk down a stairway leading to the cellar in

single file, the officers had been shot through the small window of an adjacent room. I have my doubts about how the criminals could have obtained such detailed information about the executions. But there is no doubt that our brothers had been executed.

How had they chosen who to take to the KGB prison and who to interrogate at the camp? Who to execute, and who to sentence to hard labour? None of the prisoners had committed any crime. Amongst the officers left at the camp were ones who had fought in 1919 in the Latvian War of Independence against the Soviet Army. Some had even received medals for valour. Amongst the ones taken for execution were young lads, cadets of the Military Academy. I still remember Aleksandrs Popovs, a tall, pale, blue-eyed youth, blond and skinny. He was perpetually hungry and could not hide this. He was always freezing, with blue lips and goose-bumps on his bluish cheeks. Because of the effects of starvation and the cold, he couldn't do much work, but was always cheerful and never lost for words. I liked him and felt sorry for him more than the others. He was only a boy, not ready to face the hellish conditions at Norilsk. This lad had been one of the ones taken to the KGB prison. He did not return. We came to the conclusion that he had been shot. What was his crime? He had committed no crime!

And how had the decision about the allocation of sentences been made? One group sentenced to 6 years, another to 7 years, the third to 8, the fourth to 10, the last but by no means least, sentenced to death. How had this been decided? Nobody was guilty and there were no records about any of us. But the decision had been made. Most likely, the official who had been assigned to carry out this task had achieved the result by very simple means. Eyes closed, he would point a pencil at the list of prisoners names

and, eyes now open, read out the name touched by the tip of his pencil. This one is to be sent to KGB prison. Repeating the same procedure, this time he strikes off two names. These two then, also off to KGB prison. Or maybe he chose the first couple of dozen names from the top of the list, some from the bottom of the list, and some from the middle. The same with the other pages, and his task was accomplished.

Dreadful, ghastly, inhumane? Certainly. Yet, during my long years at the camp, I heard eyewitness reports of even more horrendous events. I have heard so many terrible stories about both Soviet labour camps and Nazi concentration camps, that there is little left that can shock me. But I cannot stop the feeling of ants crawling over all my body when I think how inhumane, heartless, and cruel the most intelligent being on this earth – man – can be.

In the autumn of 1941, we were ordered to build a road from Camp No. 7, past mine No. 3/4 to Bear Mountain. Our brigade was lead by Jurjans, a Latvian lieutenant. Our task was to chisel out blocks of frozen earth, load this into carts, dump it onto the site for the new road and then to level it. Work began in early autumn, it was still quite warm. In order to speed up the work, we were allocated horses and carts. Every morning these arrived from the horse compound. The horses were a Siberian breed: small, dirty animals with long, dark brown shaggy coats and large floppy ears. In the early days of road works, these horses looked well fed and cared for. As the weeks went by, they became thinner, their coats shaggier and ears floppier. When pulling the carts, the ears dangled as if lifeless. During the last stages of the road-works, they had become extremely thin and could no longer pull their carts. The work on the road had to be halted. Even though oats and hay

had been allocated for the upkeep of the horses, the horses perished, because of a lack of feed. The fact was that the oats had been eaten by us, and the hay had become stuffing for our empty sleeping bags. This made lying on the bare boards of the bunks more bearable, easing the pain of our ever protruding bones digging into our lice-riddled, calloused skin. We gathered whatever we could lay our hands on in order to fill these empty cotton bags, and the owners of the horses had been happy to exchange the hay for any small article we had managed to conceal from the guards.

Even more intolerable than the bare boards were the ferocious hunger pains which, as weeks went by, became worse and worse. The prisoners tried to appease their hunger by eating the buds of tundra birches, or by sucking pine needles. Then, out of the blue: oats! They were fresh and of very good quality. A mirror, a handkerchief, or a comb from home was exchanged for the oats. Others paid in cash. The owners of the horses traded all of the oats without any qualms. Soon, the horses became unfit for work, leaving their owners without an income. Then the owners themselves perished, having destroyed their own livelihood.

The owners of these horses seemed to belong to the Magyar race. They were short of stature and dark from head to foot; to my mind, they were also dark on the «inside». Black hair, black stubble on their faces, and dark brown eyes with dirty oily pants and padded jackets, they were forever swearing and hitting their horses. Their clothes were covered in lice which, during the autumn, they got rid of by burning over a bonfire. They took off their shirts, quickly pulling on their outer clothing, then held the shirts over the bonfire. The heat made the lice fall into the fire and there they crackled as they burned, the noise reminding me of the fireworks on the banks of the Daugava River in Latvia.

At the beginning of winter, the conditions became unbearable. The wind was cold at the foot of the mountain. We felt as if we were naked. Our feet and hands, which were clad only in thin cotton gloves, felt the cold most of all. On our feet we wore «socks» made from our worn outer garments. These came up to the knee and had to be tied on. Our «shoes» were made from rope. Dirt found its way inside these through the gaps in the rope, and stuck to the inside of the «shoes» and to the «socks» and froze. This hindered our mobility. Feet froze, and sores on the heels and toes festered and would not heal for many months.

A friend of mine from the Military Academy, Sergejs Milgrāvis, was on our team. He was a big man with broad shoulders. Compared to him, Janka and I were like sickly lambs. He was a diligent worker. He did most of the breaking up of the lumps of frozen clay. Our task was to load it into the carts. The exhausting work sapped our strength. The work made us perspire, and then the icy wind cooled us down too quickly. Sergejs was unlucky and, as a result of these conditions, became ill. He developed a dreadful wheeze, so that it was painful to listen to him. I don't remember how long he continued to work in this state, perhaps one or two more days. Then, he simply disappeared. We did not doubt that Sergejs had gone down the same road as had many of our friends. It is with sorrow and sadness that I now remember this quiet, physically and mentally strong man, who was endowed with a sense of humour. But when I returned to Rīga after my release, I experienced a few unexpected surprises, one of them was meeting Sergejs Milgrāvis. Although he was only a shadow of his former self, he had managed to hang onto his best characteristics. He told me that he had been taken to hospital at Krasnoyarsk in a very weakened state. Although the conditions there were not much better than at Norilsk, he had survived.

The Russians have a proverb: «The horses die, but the masters survive.» This is what happened in our case: the horses perished, but the prisoners kept on working. As weeks went by, the number of workers in our brigade decreased. The few who remained had to keep on working. In the beginning, each brigade had 40 men; soon the numbers dwindled. This also happened in the other brigades. Prisoners from one dwindling brigade were used to reinforce other dwindling brigades. Every day prisoners were dying. High fevers, pleurisy, pneumonia, frost-bite, and festering sores took their toll. The highest number of deaths, however, were caused by dysentery. There was insufficient food, no medication, and no suitable accommodation to treat the sick and dying. We were all under one roof, so the ones suffering with pneumonia soon developed dysentery. Their weakened bodies could not fight these diseases and so lost the battle for survival. The dead were collected from the barracks and taken behind a shed where our footwear was put to dry out. There they lay in rows on the banks of a stream waiting to be carted away in the death carts. They were naked, frozen, staring at the foreign northern sky with their lifeless open eyes.

Once I witnessed the «carting away of the dead». Two horses arrived hitched to a sled, a second sled attached to the first one. On each sled was a long box, which was soon stacked full of the naked corpses. After rolling and then lighting a cigarette, the driver casually climbed onto the front of the sled. And so began a journey taken by many of my friends to join those already resting in a mass grave at the foot of Mount Smith.

In the spring of 1956, I visited this prison burial ground. At the foot of the mountain I found wooden stakes with numbers on them. In this frozen burial ground, far away from their homeland and dear ones, lay my unlucky friends.

The officials did not seem to be worried about the high death rate at the camp. Perhaps death was one way of making room in the camp for the new prisoners arriving at the camp in large numbers from spring right through to late autumn. The barracks became overcrowded. There were no materials available to build new ones, because all building materials had been allocated for the construction of a new power station, factories for processing nickel and copper, as well as for the building of roads, bridges, and housing complexes for the free citizens. Norilsk was rich in coal and metals, the products of which were sent to the front. The «free» labourers also told us that Norilsk was surrounded by large lakes abundant with fish and that large herds of deer roamed the area a couple of hundred kilometres away. Nobody would have had to suffer a shortage of food if hunting and fishing parties had been sent out. But this was not so. The prisoners were starving and weak. It was incomprehensible why our captors acted as they did. Who would benefit from the numerous deaths that were a direct result of starvation? We also could not understand why they treated us like animals both at the camp and at work. Who benefited from the tragedy of May 1942, when our friends did not return from the KGB prison? Among them strong, bright men, doctors, engineers, other specialists who could have contributed to the construction of a grandiose industrial complex in the north and thus to the manufacture of materials needed for the war effort.

One of the most unbearable tortures was «the counting of the prisoners». In my opinion this was not designed to prevent escape, but rather to torture the prisoners. The prisoners were counted at the gates when setting off to work. This was repeated on their return. They were counted inside the barracks, sick bays, kitchens, work sheds, and storerooms, not forgetting under the

bunks. More than one guard did the counting but rarely did they reach the same result. The counting had to be repeated over and over again. At times we stood outside the barracks, soaked to the skin, waiting for the counting to end. Our feet sank into the mud and we shivered from cold and exhaustion. Occasionally the counting was accomplished in one go; we rushed into the barracks and fell into our bunks to rest our weary bones, to get warm and to catch a few moments of sleep. Then suddenly the command to line up again. If anyone was slow to respond, the guards would pull him from the bunk by the legs and beat him.

Only a few of the guards possessed any humane characteristics; the majority were shadowy scoundrels of limited intellect. Their greatest pleasure was to exert their power over the unfortunate prisoners. Some guards got real pleasure in forcing the prisoners to march through mud and water, then to make them lie down in the mud. If anyone refused, shots were fired above the prisoners' heads. The weakest prisoners were prodded with bayonets. Although they did not stab the flesh, trousers and jackets were reduced to shreds. Some idiots set dogs upon the weaker prisoners when they could not keep up with the others. The guards sneered and laughed at the suffering of the prisoners.

During the first months at the camp, we learned never to obey a guard if asked to carry wood to a boundary of the camp. There had been occasions when such a prisoner had been shot for escaping. We also learned never to approach a guard. One could be shot for «attacking» him.

Once I saw a prisoner shot. It happened in front of our brigade. When we were lined up to be counted before returning to the camp, Jersovs, the book-keeper, was found to be missing. One of the guards went to fetch him. He appeared and took his place in

the line. The guard approached the line-up, a shot rang out, the book-keeper fell to the ground dead.

Another time, in the middle of winter, I saw a prisoner standing naked. The guards had ordered him to undress. Most likely he had been guilty of warming himself too often at the bonfire. The scene was a horrifying one. Snow covered the ground all around us, the cold crept into every fibre of our bodies and suddenly, the unbelievable sight of a naked man standing on the top of a hill. How long he was forced to stand there, I do not know.

But scenes such as this no longer aroused any feelings in us. We had seen and experienced too much. The barracks and food awaited us. We had been out in the freezing cold without shelter, food, or water for 15 hours. We had been breaking up the ground, frozen as hard as cement, using only hoes, crowbars, and hammers. Our only interest was in food and water.

The first winter at Norilsk was the hardest. We suffered mentally and physically. From 1941 to 1945 there seemed no hope that I would remain among the living. I felt the icy breath of death all around me. There was no reason to think that, even if I did survive, I would get out of the camp. It would have been far better to have died on the day of the arrest. I could not get used to the conditions at the camp: the cold, starvation, and the daily humiliations. I was tortured by uncertainty about the future. All of this weakened my body. I became one of the weakest among the prisoners. Still, I survived! Why?

Later, my mother said that her prayers, her faith had saved me. Perhaps some day science will find that there are such supernatural forces, but I do not believe in these. I feel that my survival can firstly be attributed to the hardships of my youth. I had had to struggle for everything I achieved. Secondly, I have never been

afraid of death. Only once, in 1942, in a state of madness, I contemplated suicide as a means of escaping death by hunger. Thirdly, my sense of humour helped me to survive, and fourthly, I tried to preserve my mental state, not to lose my identity and human qualities. On setting out from camp each morning, I prayed to God asking Him not to let me become an animal or to lose my mind, to let me stay strong and honest and pure of heart. The spiritual world did not cease to exist for me, but helped me to survive. After returning from work, I never ran to the kitchen for the rations as some did. This sight was an odious one. With faces blackened by coal dust, dirty hands, muddy feet, clothes soaked through and frozen to the skin, they ran from the gates to the kitchen to be first in the queue. A friend would run to the barracks to get the utensils. These prisoners reasoned that the food was best while still fresh and unmixed. On receiving their rations, they hurried to the barracks and, often unwashed and still in their work clothes, gulped down the watery soup at the same speed. Then the dishes were licked clean. Impatiently they waited for their portion of bread, the staple of our diet. This was consumed just as rapidly. To me such actions seemed unworthy. I reasoned that if one started to think about food long before the end of working hours, the stomach would begin to produce gastric juices and a person only became more hungry. When the time came to receive the food, such people were in a state of ecstasy. If one consumed starvation rations in such a state, the organism would not get the full benefits of the food. These prisoners spent 24 hours a day thinking about food. In the mornings, they were the first at the kitchen window waiting for their breakfast ration.

There were others who lingered in the hope that things of more substance, cabbage, grits, bits of fish, might sink to the bottom of

the pot. I did not like these people any better, because the moment of eating was also the only thing they thought of. To me it seemed a mistake to increase the torture and pain caused by starvation by constantly thinking about food. Nobody could tell when the soup would be better, at the beginning or at the end of the dishing out. Sometimes the cooks added water to the soup if they thought that there would not be enough.

After returning from work, I headed for my barracks, took off my work clothes, washed my face and hands, cleaned my footwear and, only then, went to collect my ration. By then the bread had arrived. I ate my meal calmly. This seemed to me to be a more civilised way to behave. There were others who did the same, and I feel that behaviour such as this contributed to my survival.

I would like to add another important factor which played a part in ensuring my survival: pure luck.

THE HUNGER

Near the entrance of our mine was a valley and a small river; on the hill opposite, shacks, for the free citizens. One day, near the shack closest to the mine, we spotted a heap of cabbage leaves, old and yellowing. Among the leaves seemed to be a few green ones. When a prisoner is starving, it does not matter how old the cabbage is. One's eyes are always searching for anything edible and, at night, one's dreams are only of bread.

There was a large, broad-shouldered man in our brigade, who looked as if he had had a good life before his arrest. Every time we were allowed out of the mine for a break, his blue eyes were immediately drawn to that pile of rotting cabbage leaves. It was

not possible to reach them because a guard was posted just outside the mine entrance. Soon we were herded back into the mine. I was working quite close to the entrance when, suddenly, a shot rang out, then another, followed by an outburst of swearing. I saw our broad-shouldered work mate running from that heap of cabbage, having managed to stuff a few leaves into his jacket. As he ran, he crammed those slimy leaves into his mouth. The guard ran towards him and, pushing the butt of his rifle into the prisoner's side, grabbed the rotten cabbage from him and threw it to the ground. With a few more pokes of the rifle, the prisoner was again safely in our company. Surprisingly, the behaviour of this guard was unusually kind. Any of the other guards would have finished the prisoner off with a single shot. I was horrified at our friend's desperate action. An hour after this incident, I heard more shots and swearing. Hunger had driven this prisoner to madness. Once again he had run for the cabbages. The guard beat him severely with the butt of his rifle. He was in such pain that he was unable to work for the rest of the day. To me it seemed that he suffered more from his inability to get at the cabbages than from even the guard's savage beating.

TO THE BATH

Late one autumn evening, our captors decided to take us to the bath-house. Dirt clogged every pore of our skin. The evening roll call seemed longer than usual. It had rained all day and we were soaked right through. We had just dozed off on the hard bunks, hoping to dry out through the night, when a command rang out: «Prepare to go to the bath-house!»

We had to line up outside the barracks. At the gates, we were joined by guards with rifles and dogs. The night was dark. Rain pelted down. Instead of taking the road, we were marched across the uneven ground of the tundra; puddles, shrubs, and sparse northern fir trees prevented us from keeping to strict formation. Many were tripping over these obstacles and could not keep up. With the help of dogs, the guards urged the fallen prisoners on with their rifle butts. We were driven in great haste, as if to a fire.

I wished I could just fall down and go to sleep, but I knew that I must not. I was almost at the end of the line. The rifle butt and the bayonet poked through my jacket. The dogs tore at my clothing. I must not fall. I did not want to die. I must move closer to the front of the line so that the dogs could not reach me.

At last we arrived at the bath-house, but, as there were others there before us, we were forced to wait outside. Finally, we got inside. Our clothes were taken for delousing. We were given a microscopic piece of soap.

It was almost midnight. The workers were tired and hurried us on. Suddenly the hot water was turned off. Finished or not, we were told to stop washing. When we received our garments, they were still hot and wet, and smelt disgusting. Outside we were counted and recounted. Finally, we moved off, arriving back at the camp only around breakfast time. Some tried to snatch some sleep; others, rattling their utensils, rushed off to get some food. No time to rest: we had to set off to work at 6.45. Above the gate was the camp slogan: «Honest Work is the Shortest Road to Freedom.»

By the spring of 1942, I had reached the end of my endurance. Totally exhausted, extremely thin, muscles wasted, I could hardly drag my feet. It was even hard to sit up and get off the bunk. I was apathetic to everything except food and sleep.

As a result of a lack of vitamins in our food, we developed scurvy. The rations we received were minute and of little nutritional value. We looked like skeletons with our bones protruding, and our skin looked like that of a plucked chicken. We were covered in lice and bed bugs: they sucked our blood mercilessly. Our skin was always itchy. We lacked the energy to ward off these horrible insects; they seemed to have been created by our captors for the sole purpose of our destruction.

In any situation, no matter how bad, there will always be those who find ways to improve their lot. This was the case even in the first weeks at the camp. There were some who sold tobacco to buy bread, then sold the bread to buy tobacco, managing to make a profit with each transaction. Others established contacts with the free citizens. Go-betweens found saleable goods from the prisoners, which were then traded to the free citizens. Some got cushy jobs in the kitchen, the bread cutting room, store-house, or workshops. Some degenerates got extra portions of bread or some tobacco for spying on the other prisoners and, as a result of such informers, I and many of my friends received a second sentence more severe than the first.

Once everything had been sold, these people no longer could carry on their «businesses» and could no longer escape disease, suffering, and even death. Once the bribes ran out, the cushy jobs also ended. These former «lords» were then put to work in the mines or on the roads. As they were not used to the hard work and meagre rations, they soon collapsed and many died.

Then, during the first months of 1942, when a great number of the prisoners had already perished, a surprising thing happened. The rations improved. The soup and gruel were thicker; occasionally we received an extra piece of fish, a pancake, or some stewed

fruit. Sometimes you could even see a speck of oil floating in the soup.

Why was this happening? Evidently there had been a directive not to annihilate all of the so-called «specialists», that is, the officers of the Baltic states. For many of us it was much too late. We had reached the stage where we needed much more to recover our health and strength. The deaths continued. Many became so weak that they could not climb down from their bunks, let alone dress themselves. These skeletons were transferred to the invalid brigades. Other were sent to Valoka, Lama, Dudinka. Some ended up at Krasnoyarsk.

It is hard for me to believe that the government knew about the conditions at the camps. After all, the prisoners were valuable slave labour who could be used to build up the national economy.

On 9 March, 1942, I fell ill with the worst possible disease a prisoner could get: dysentery. The previous evening, I had had to be helped back to camp by my workmates. I could not stand up and kept falling down in the snow. My friends helped me in the same way as I had helped others before. After reaching the camp and being counted, my friends hurried off like hungry dogs to receive their rations. I was forgotten outside. Staggering, I moved slowly towards the barrack; my head was reeling and my legs did not obey me. I was determined to reach my bunk. If I remained outside, I knew I would freeze to death. I gathered all of my remaining strength, moving forward step by step. All who were still able to move ran past me. Had I reached the end of the road? I did not want to believe this, but I had seen so many young, strong men perish! None of them believed that they would leave their bones in the cold foreign tundra far away from their homeland.

I gathered my last strength, but then, suddenly, a gust of wind blew me flat onto the ground. I could not get up, I had no more strength. I tried again, but in vain. Must I die here like a dog? I tried to call out, but I could only whisper. I could not breathe. My mouth was dry. Then, I saw bright lights, then darkness.

I was overtaken by a feeling of peacefulness. I was warm and comfortable. No more snow or ice. No cold, no more frozen hands and feet. I was at home, my loved ones around me...

Suddenly, someone pulled me up by the collar and shook me. I woke as if from a deep sleep. Who was this unknown person who did not allow me to die? I would have frozen to death had he not shaken me. If I believed in fate or the supernatural, it would be easy to explain. But I do not. Some would say that my hour had not yet come. I was destined to live.

I started to move towards the sick-bay. When I had reached it, my appearance must have stunned everyone. Somehow I crawled into the surgery. The doctor was a Latvian, Dzenītis. My appearance horrified him:

«You look beyond all description. Like a monkey! Skin and bones. How can you still move?»

I knew that I was thin, but I had not known I looked so dreadful. There were many others waiting in the corridor. The doctor could not spend much time with me. He gave me the only medicine available: cod liver oil. The best he could do was to release a prisoner from work. There was no greater happiness than to be able to spend a whole day sleeping in the barrack.

The doctor told me to return the next morning. In the warmth of the surgery, I had regained some strength. Somehow I managed to stagger back, get my ration and then fall into a blissful sleep, thinking about the day of rest ahead. Next morning, I felt very ill

and nauseous. I had severe diarrhoea. There was blood in my stools. I reported to the first aid post. I had dysentery! I was told to return to the barrack and wait. It would have been blissful had I not had to run to the latrine every few minutes. That morning was the first time since arriving in the camp that I had no desire for food. After three whole days, I was finally summoned to sick bay. I was too weak to stand. I had not eaten anything for three days and had constantly been running to and from the latrine.

I was ordered to be taken to the hospital in town. At the gates of the camp stood a small scruffy Siberian horse, hitched to an open sled. The driver and a guard carrying a rifle were also in the sled. As we started the journey into town, a snow-storm raged around us. Two or three times I had to jump off the sled to answer the call of nature. I had lost my gloves and my festering fingers were frozen. I could not button up my trousers. I held them up with my elbows, trying to keep my hands warm inside my jacket. Then nature called again, but it seemed pointless to get off the sled...

Then I passed out. An orderly was undressing me when I awoke as if from the dead. He was asking me to step into a bath, a proper bath with warm water and in a warm, well lit room. Soap and a washcloth! All such things had been long forgotten. The orderly helped me into the bath. He had clean hands, he was clean shaven and was wearing a white coat. He seemed as if from another world. He did not curse, swear or yell at me, but talked calmly and even made me smile.

There were rows of beds, painted yellow, with clean blankets, white sheets and white pillowcases. Even the patients here looked different from those at the camp sick bay. In fact, most of the patients looked healthier than the majority of the prisoners!

These patients belonged to a different class, which was visited by doctors and orderlies, given medicine and actually treated.

On the following day I was put on a special diet. Surprisingly I was not hungry and hardly ate anything. Eating resulted immediately in an attack of «the runs». This seemed inappropriate in these clean conditions. They brought me milk soup with rice or semolina. The orderly elevated my pillow and began to feed me, as I was too weak to sit up and to lift the spoon to my lips myself. Milk soup! I was dizzy with happiness! I had not set eyes on milk soup for the last nine months! Suddenly, I felt hungry! This dream was short-lived. After the first mouthful the diarrhoea began again. I could not move. The orderly put me on a white bedpan. The bedpan filled with blood, I felt as if I was slowly fading away.

On waking the next evening, I saw five or six people in white coats surrounding the bed next to mine. This bed was occupied by an Estonian. Was it a consultation or a teaching round? Exhausted, I drifted off again and did not see what happened. By the next morning the Estonian was dead. He had already been taken away by the orderlies. The same evening the group of people clad in white coats was standing around my bed. One of the doctors was explaining something to the others. The scene was the same as the previous night around the Estonian's bed. Would my fate be the same? Would I be dead tomorrow? I wanted to question the doctors, but I could not speak Russian. Also, I was drifting in and out of consciousness. Once again I fell into a death-like sleep.

Incredibly, the next morning, I was still alive! I felt my hands and tried to pinch myself to see if it was really true.

They kept me at the hospital for five or six days and, although I hardly ate anything, I did not die. Apparently, the doctors had

decided that I had a chance to survive and wanted to help me. I spent the next seven months in the prison hospital. Even after being cured of dysentery, I remained so thin that the doctors shook their heads while examining me. My weight had dropped to 40 kg. I was unable to walk for months. Finally, when I was able to stand, I started to walk by hanging onto the sides of the beds with both hands. Then I suffered a relapse affecting my lungs, liver and nervous system. My temperature was constantly above normal.

Finally, I was discharged and sent back to the camp and the mines.

One of the doctors from the dysentery unit will always stay in my memory, Zelma (Petrovna) Jirgensons, a Latvian, who had emigrated to Russia in 1914. The Soviets arrested her in 1937. After finding out that I was a Latvian, she granted me special favours and treated me as much as possible. She prescribed buttermilk for me, 100 grams or more daily. This seemed like God's gift to me, even if it was made from powdered milk.

The festering sores on my hands and feet healed during the stay in hospital. Every day they were bathed and ointments applied. This saved me from the gangrene that took not only the limbs, but also the lives of many other prisoners. I had only met one Estonian and one Latvian during the seven months I spent in hospital. The members of The Special Contingent, the officers of the Baltic states, were usually not taken to the hospital but treated at the camp's sick bay. Only few survived treatment there. Most of the officers who had fallen ill from 1941 to 1944 had died. Was it fate that, due to severe overcrowding, Dr Dzenitis had been unable to accommodate me in the sick bay? Had this not been the case, I would have surely gone to meet my Maker within a matter

of weeks. If there is such a thing as luck, then I was the lucky one. Only God knows why I remained alive, while other young, strong men were dropping like flies all around me.

Was my survival the result of my upbringing, the hardships suffered in my childhood and youth, the simple life, food and hard work? Or was it God's answer to my mother's prayers and her faith and hope that I would return home? Perhaps, some day in the future, scientists will uncover the power of prayer and hope.

SKETCHES DRAWN ON A TRAIN
CLATTERING TO SIBERIA

Aina Roze

*These drawings were sketched
on scraps of paper by Aina Roze
on a train taking her and her mother
to Siberia in June 1941.*



In this photograph we are all still together. The inscription on the back says, «Leaving for France», so it must have been in 1933. I was six, had been ill with whooping cough, and the doctors weren't happy about the sound of my lungs. My parents were worried, and Father made a decision: his child had to go to a warm country, no matter the cost. South was Menton, near Nice in France. We stayed in a small cottage built on a

cliffside, and the landlady was called Madame Peritie. Three of us went there – Mother, Jānis (standing behind her) and I. After three months Father arrived to take us home. So I have swum in the Mediterranean, where the beaches are covered with blue pebbles.

Both my brothers were considerably older than me. There was a nine-year difference between Jānis and me, and a twelve-year one between Ilmārs and me. They used to tease me, but in a good-natured way, of course. They called me Princess, probably because, being a sickly child, I was mollycoddled.

Sketches Drawn On a Train Clattering to Siberia

Here we are in the 19th wagon of the train. My mother, below right, is wearing only a petticoat because it was very hot. The drawing shows the top bunks. The children are at the top, my legs are in the foreground. Later, when my colleagues at the Academy of Art looked at these drawings and praised them, I thought to myself, «I've drawn the dress in such a primitive way, in straight lines as if it's been starched.» You can also see our belongings – a saucepan, a basket and a bottle of water.

We were arrested at night. School had just broken up for the summer, and I was staying overnight with my friend, Ārija Bikše, the daughter of an architect, in Mežaparks¹. Suddenly I was woken and told they had come for me. A black car was waiting outside, two men entered and, without any explanation, ordered me to return home. I remember my friend's family standing at the gate.

Back at the apartment, Mother was running to and fro, packing some things. She had insisted that I be brought home because she wanted us all to be together. Father was sitting on a chair with his head down. It was the second time this was happening to him,



¹ *Mežaparks* – literally «Forest Park», an attractive residential suburb with many one-family dwellings on the outskirts of Riga.

the first being in 1905² when the punitive expedition sentenced him to death.

We were driven to Zaslauks station in a lorry. Several trains were waiting there, and we were immediately separated. In her confusion Mother didn't know what to give Father, so she gave him the suitcase with bedsheets.



This is Seryozha Brauns, a Jewish boy. Seems I'd been trying to write something, the letters are crooked. The train was rattling along and my hand was unsteady. The little boy was two months old here. He and his mother were on the lower bunk, we were on the upper one.

A few years ago, when my drawings were shown at an exhibition of arts and crafts by people deported to Siberia, the catalogue had somehow found its way to Seryozha's mother, who now lives in Israel.

She wrote to tell me that she had recognised our 19th wagon

² In 1905 Latvia and the other Baltic states were part of Tsarist Russia. Many Latvians participated in the so-called «1905 Revolution», an uprising against the Tsar's regime and a call for social reforms. The Tsar sent in a punitive expedition, executing some revolutionaries and causing many others to flee.

Sketches Drawn On a Train Clattering to Siberia

and her son in the drawings. She asked me to send her the originals so that she could photocopy them. I had no objections and did so. The drawings came back with the news that Seryozha was now a professor of biology at the University of Jerusalem. The old lady and I occasionally exchange letters.

This is Mrs Kuplais, the eldest daughter of Antons Benjamiņš³. She was born in the same year as my mother – 1888. A very interesting person. She had studied in St. Petersburg. She was very knowledgeable and could enlighten us on many topics. She was imperious by nature and looked down on her fellow Latvians as if to say «You semi-illiterates».

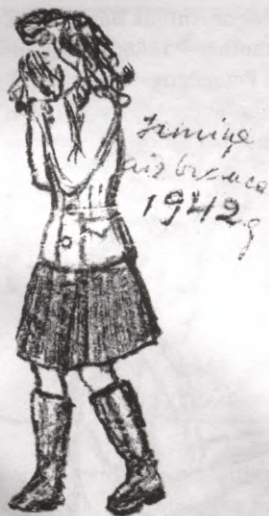
In my drawing she looks most purposeful. Both she and my mother used to unravel blankets and knit things. There were no knitted garments where we were and they were in great demand.

It wasn't as if all we ever did there in the north was mourn



³ Antons Benjamiņš – a well-to-do Riga newspaper publisher.

and weep. I remember one occasion when I came home to find Mother and Mrs Kuplais (they were no longer assigned to labouring then) singing «An Italian Capriccio» at the top of their voices. There was a radio in every hut, and the ladies were in seventh heaven – they had just heard beautiful music.

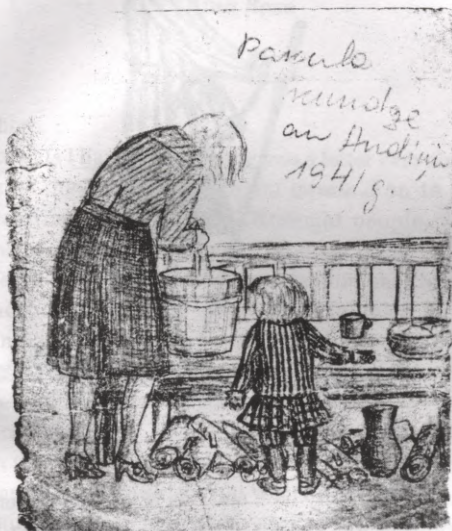


I had a friend, Irmiņa. She was 21, I was 15 at the time. She seemed very old to me, but we got on well. She and her mother were being sent on along the Yenisey River to some fishing village. The drawing shows my sorrow. My jacket is still from home but the boots I got there.



These are Siberian beggars. They were not drawn from life, but half-imagined. However, I had seen people like them.

Sketches Drawn On a Train Clattering to Siberia



This is in a schoolhouse in the first camp we were sent to. Mrs Pakula was there with her two small daughters. Here she is with Andina. The dear little thing would stand around whenever someone was eating.



This is what it was really like, and this is me. The other bank of the River Yenisey was visible in the distance. I didn't have my own skis, I had borrowed these from someone. I'm wearing felt boots. I returned home in this padded jacket in 1947. My dog slept on it for quite a while.

I've always been more interested in people and have never drawn landscapes.

LETTER TO MY FATHER

Aina Roze

Dear Father,

In my thoughts I have been writing you a letter ever since we were separated at the Torņakalns¹ freight terminal on 14 June, 1941, when, standing in a crowd of distraught people, we watched bewildered as you were led away to another train.

This letter as a never-ending conversation has changed from a child's account of events, albeit often mingled with cries of despair into your now grown up and aged daughter's reflections, memories and attempts to be near you, to understand you.

As a result of the poverty and harsh living conditions that you experienced as a child, your aim and philosophy of life were to reawaken the spirit of your nation, a nation that had been scorned and disparaged for centuries. You wanted to promote culture and foster education. You published works by well-known Latvian writers, your peers, and popularised the portraits of persons involved in cultural activities, as well as reproductions of famous paintings. But in so doing, you never lost sight of the aesthetic value of a book, its quality, design, illustrations, lettering and so on. You acquired this attitude from your teacher, J.Ozols, an

¹ *Torņakalns* – an inner suburb of Riga.

outstanding publisher in Cēsis², and it became your conviction also. Quality was always a priority, and books were always printed on very good paper. But for your own notes and sketches you used bits of paper, even the blank spaces on used envelopes. I became aware of this much later as I was going through the few manuscripts and drafts that have remained, despite the despicable attempts by a recently deceased literary figure to destroy the archives and memory of many prominent Latvian people, including you.

It is strange that I am now as old as you were when we were forever separated near the red cattle wagons. It seems remarkable that in many ways I have developed your outlook on life, even though you have never actually instilled it in me.

The era during which we were humiliated and ground down, and at the beginning of which you died, has not been kind to our nation. It is still not known how many people were murdered and how many families destroyed. Perhaps the real numbers will never be known, for they would be horrifying.

You know, it was actually Mother's sunny disposition and the vitality she had absorbed from the country life of her childhood that helped us through those devastating years. (Remember her account of how she arrived in Rīga from Kurzeme³ at the turn of the century,



A woman wearing a woollen shawl and «pas-talas», hand-crafted sandals.

² Cēsis – an important provincial town 100 km from Riga.

³ Kurzeme – the westernmost region of Latvia.

wearing a woollen shawl and hand-crafted leather sandals?) She hardly ever cried, but if at all possible, set to work.

I want to tell you that we took just one book with us – Rabindranath Tagore's writings, which Mother had picked up from her bedside table. We all read it, and before long it went missing. You would probably be interested to know that a small local library in Siberia was a godsend for me. Within eighteen months I had mastered Russian well enough to start on Russian classical writers. I am most grateful to authors such as Pushkin, Turgenyev and Lermontov, for they helped me to survive. I used to whisper my favourite poems at night when I was so hungry that I couldn't sleep. Sometimes I still recite them; the reason for my insomnia, however, is no longer the same.

Fortunately you have been spared seeing the way people nowadays often treat and «cherish» books and other culturally valuable things. Cries for help from state archives are often published in newspapers. Managerial incompetence and waste have become the norm. It's only a small step from throwing out a piece of bread to the destruction of one's cultural heritage. Can it really be possible that only the ravages of war and years of deprivation could change one's attitude? I wouldn't wish war and hunger on anyone.

I remember the cry of «Kipyatok!» at just about every station where we halted as our train, crammed with women and children, crawled eastwards at a snail's pace in June, 1941. At that time I didn't appreciate the value of boiling water, that one of the women would under military guard bring to each wagon. This water didn't taste good, and I didn't feel hungry during the whole journey. But it wasn't long before life in Siberia in semi-starvation made you realise what a miraculous drink this mysterious «kipyatok» was. The tiny bread rations Mother and I received,

together with a couple of litres of hot water created the illusion of having eaten for a while. Ever since then I can't bear to see people not valuing bread.

Finally we reached the frigid north of Siberia, the tundra, about 350 kilometres beyond the Arctic Circle. We were transported there below decks on barges along the Yenisey River. We were jammed into several levels. Some people were ill, and there was someone dying near us.

The village where we had to disembark was called Ustj-Port, a name that I in my child's naivety associated with my brother's sports club – U(niversity) Sport. There was tundra all around with tiny, low-growing bushes and a river eighteen kilometres wide expanding into a delta not far away.

A stark image that is etched on my memory is that of a mother of two little girls lying on the top bunk in our barrack. She had died during the night and her body had not been removed yet. The girls were crouching beside their mother, fear and bewilderment in their eyes. Their blonde hair hadn't been combed and they didn't understand what had happened. One girl's name was Laima (Happiness).

The people in your labour camp, just like those in our place of exile, were also probably of various ethnic origin. I remember there were Ukrainians, Poles, Finns, Germans from the Volga region, Kalmyks, Hebrews, Russians, Lithuanians, Estonians and Greeks. But we were friendly and helpful in our collective misfortune. Some of the local inhabitants were Russians who had been deported earlier. Although they treated us with a certain degree of reserve, I never heard them abusing us by calling us fascists. Nevertheless they did occasionally remark that they envied us for having at one time lived in conditions fit for humans.

Once or twice a month we had to go to the KGB authorities to register. We had no passports to show, just a scrap of paper with columns that you had to fill in. There was no sense in all this – where would we escape, seeing that we were just about on the coast of the Arctic Ocean and there was a vast expanse of tundra for hundreds of kilometres around? Escape would have meant certain death. But we all lived not with the thought of death, but in the hope of returning home one day.

I think I will always remember what a Polish woman once said to me and Mother as, after receiving our bread ration, the three of us were walking back to our quarters. Her words were: «This is not bread, it's sorrow.» The woman's remark conveyed the utter misery and despair we all knew so well. In no way did she mean to find fault with the small piece of bread she had received.

Your conditions, Father, were no doubt infinitely more difficult. You survived them for a mere eight to ten months, to eventually succumb to hunger, cold, disease and humiliation. I know now where it happened. A person who miraculously returned from that hell told me. And he remembers you.

In the Soviet prison system there were three camps north of the town of Solikamska in the Perma region. They were Chertyozh, Prizhim and Mogila⁴. Deportees were first sent to the first camp, then as they lost their capacity to work and fell ill, transported in stages to more distant places to await their death. It is obvious that Mogila was the last stop, where you must have arrived in January or perhaps February, 1942. No-one bothered to record the exact date. At the beginning of that winter, those who still had a scrap of energy left were able to bury their dead companions, but by the

⁴ *Mogila* in Russian means «a grave».

second half of winter they were incapable of doing that. The deceased were dragged out of the barracks en masse, feet first, and stacked up outside. Later they were lugged further away and simply covered with snow and lumps of earth. And what happened in summer? The wind, the rain, the sun and foxes did the rest.

I would like to know where these tragic camps were located. Then at long last I could stand there in a field of summer grass, lean against a birch or pine tree that has perhaps sprung to life from your or your unfortunate companions' hands, eyes, last breath. Do not weep, Father, that you have no grave. Your spirit is and forever will be with us here in Latvia.

You would have liked to have your final resting place in the Vecpiebalga⁵ cemetery, or in Lielupe⁶, where your mother is buried. You had a headstone made for her, designed by Niklāvs Strunke⁷. Mother is also buried there now. She lived to the ripe old age of 97, but unfortunately did not see the day when enlightened people, who wish to honour your memory, started working in the bookstore you established. Of course there are some who want to discredit you, but those are few. They must resent the fact that your life's work has now been recorded for posterity in the annals of our long-suffering nation's cultural history.

Mother told me that you had confided in her your wish to have a long life. We waited for you for a very long time. Sometimes I wonder how you would have spent your days if you had survived and lived to a ripe old age. Perhaps the wonderful skills you acquired as a boy and young man in Piebalga would have stood you

⁵ *Vecpiebalga* – a district in central Vidzeme renowned for the large number of Latvian artists, writers and intellectuals that it has generated.

⁶ *Lielupe* – here: a summer resort on the Gulf of Riga, near Riga.

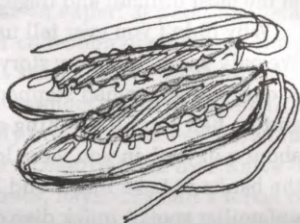
⁷ *Niklāvs Strunke* – a well-known Latvian artist, 1894-1966.

in good stead. I also believe that you were artistically inclined, although you never talked about it, not being sure about yourself and not having had the relevant education. I imagine that you would have restored books for yourself as well as your friends. You were, after all, an expert on all aspects of typography.

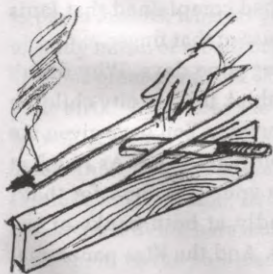
I knew that you could make bast sandals from linden trees. I was told that for a while you did that in the prison camp. The soft part of the bark was eaten. You also made «pastalas»⁸ and baskets from willow-twigs and roots

and you carved wooden spoons and pipes to play on. You knew how to prepare tapers as expertly as the people who lived in the

last century. You had, after all, grown up by the light of burning tapers, as had our mother in Kurzeme. How I wish I could ask you to chop lots and lots of splinters for kindling! You were able to set your spirit on fire with just a tiny flicker. Today we are destroying our River Daugava so that we can lounge in front of television, use refrigerators and travel on electric trains, but our spiritual light gleams but dully.



«Pastalas».



Making tapers.

⁸ *Pastalas* – leather footwear worn by Latvian country people in former times when at work and on informal occasions.

I've always wanted to tell you how helpful our relatives were, as were friends and acquaintances, even strangers, when Mother and I returned home. Their faces would light up as they remembered you. Thanks to you, they almost always supported us even at the most difficult and tragic moments.

Why didn't you ever tell us about your childhood and youth? We only know the funny story about Medors, your shepherd dog. A cow or a sheep had stepped on his ear while he was sleeping and he had run off whining and... limping! Another story was about a day when you were looking after some cows grazing on the banks of Lake Inesis and had decided to have a swim in an unfamiliar spot. A quick dive off the bank and you found yourself under water stuck in oozy mud. It had been difficult to wriggle yourself free. But you did not manage to extricate yourself from the «mud» in Perma.

The nail of your index finger was damaged. A small boy had wanted to peer into a chest and the lid had fallen shut on the inquisitive little finger. Boys at school had complained that Jānis Roze's handwriting was beautiful because of that finger.

That's all we know about those long gone days. Why didn't you talk about them? Did you perhaps think that we city children wouldn't understand? No, it's not a reproach. You have given me a generous gift – I've inherited your spiritual values. As I look at things on this earth, my eyes are now your eyes, and for that I thank you. I never tire of gazing fondly at both banks of the Daugava and its waters when I cross it. And the Rīga panorama! Each day brings a different mood and range of colours. Fog and sunset, and above all, the sky! Apparently you had said to your seventeen-year-old travelling companion, who dejected, was standing alone away from others in the cattle wagon, «Young

man, come and have a look through this crack at the beautiful clouds on the horizon.» The young man did not forget that and many years later shared this memory with us. Since then I have always admired the beauty of clouds, nature's marvellous, extravagant art. The artist Kundziņš⁹ was an expert at painting them. You know, very little is left of your collection of paintings. Not a single cloud painted by Kundziņš survives. We were told that Russian soldiers had used a large number of paintings as firewood, and they had burnt well. My brother Jānis has a few, including one by Rozentāls¹⁰. I have a beautiful one by P.Kalve¹¹ depicting a dewy meadow, birch trees, haystacks and a forest in the distance, and another one of the Pērse waterfall. I hate to tell you that we in this country have not been able to prevent the destruction of either our Staburags or Pērse waterfalls. It's hard to understand, but it's true.

I also want to thank you for the ear for music I have inherited from you. I remember with shame how hard I fought for the right not to go to piano lessons, whereas you as a child and a youth couldn't afford to study music or art although you were gifted in both.

Your great-grandson Jānis was born in the centennial year of your birth. What does the future hold for him? What will the era he will grow up in be like? He is your only descendant in Latvia. The other five great-grandchildren, David, Anna, Matthew, Daniella and Caroline, live abroad. They are English. They would be Latvians living here except for 14 June 1941. When I wanted to visit them in the summer of 1986 the uniformed official in the

⁹ *Kundziņš* – probably Pēteris Kundziņš, painter and stage designer, 1886–1958.

¹⁰ *Rozentāls* – Janis Rozentāls, 1866–1917, the painter regarded by most Latvians as their best ever.

¹¹ *P. Kalve* – Pēteris Kalve, painter, 1882–1913.

visa department informed me that my application had been refused on the grounds that they were only distant relatives.

I remember I must have been about Jānis' age when you sometimes went down to work in the bookstore even on Sundays and took me along. My recollection is of an empty Krišjāņa Barona Street¹² on a Sunday morning and the scrape of the double lock in the shop door. You would go left into your office at the back of the store and leave me to my own resources. I don't even recall you admonishing me to leave everything as it was. I would go into the mysterious world of books, pencils, erasers, penholders and inks, all of which would envelop me in their magic smell. What a wonderful aroma Johann Faber's pens exuded! I was probably allowed to take any pencils I wanted.

Perhaps my love of drawing goes back to those times? At that time I was too young to become engrossed in books.

In summer we used to go for long walks in the woods and along the seacoast. You would point out birds and trees to me, and teach me to talk softly to a hedgehog and not think ill of a small snake. Medors, our lovely Alsatian dog, would bound around us. He worshipped you, and you certainly knew how to communicate with him.

Towards evening on weekdays, when the train only we recognised came thundering across the Lielupe bridge, Medors and I would race through the pine forest to meet you. Somewhere halfway I'd rush into your arms while Medors barked and bounced around trying to push you over.

In those days the water in the Gulf of Rīga was clean and you could swim in the Lielupe, too. You often took me along on your

¹² *Krišjāņa Barona Street* – one of the main roads in central Riga, named after the renowned Latvian folksong collector Krišjānis Barons (1835–1923).

boat rides across the river to the arms of the river. White water-lilies grew there. I don't remember us ever picking them, but I do remember how we admired them. Frequently there were just the two of us as we rowed back. Medors, caught up in his hunt for water rats, lingered behind. I was always very worried that he might drown as he swam after us, only his little nose showing above the water. You would stop in the middle of the river, take the oars out of the water, wait for our dog and pull him into the boat. Medors looked guilty as he shook water all over us.

Unfortunately I was too young to realise what a brilliant yet fleeting era of Latvian culture was sweeping past, what outstanding personalities occasionally visited our home. Writers, composers, musicians and doctors, they were simply Mother's and your good friends. I was probably not a very observant child, adult conversation didn't interest me, and besides, the visitors frequently brought their children along and we would play in the next room. There were so many sincere, helpful people around us in those days, which seemed so natural. The hands of time have swept most of them away, many have met an untimely, violent death. People nowadays are different, there is more rationalism in their approach to life. Is it a sign of the times?

I was, of course, aware that not everyone was well-off during my childhood. I thought about it and it saddened me. I didn't like wearing clothes that were more beautiful than those of other children. Father, you used to help your relatives in Piebalga and assist young artists and writers. Now and then Mother provided for her sisters and their children in Kurzeme. Practical gifts were bought for Christmas. It upset me to read newspaper notices in which the children of poor parents asked Father Christmas to bring them a warm coat, boots, underwear and so on. When I grew

up, I really wanted to help people who were having such a hard time, whom life was treating so cruelly. You also felt like this in your youth, and for that you were imprisoned in Cēsis in 1905/1906, only a heartbeat away from execution.

I will always remember you as a quiet, kind and amiable person. You believed in being altruistic, helpful and responsible. Without lecturing us, your children, you tried to teach us to respect these values. I will be forever grateful to you for that. It is also impossible to forget the touch of your rough hand on my plaits, or the way you shielded me from the wind with your coat as we waited at a tram stop, or how you taught me to hold a pen so that the letters would be more even.

You have long since gone. It's a couple of years since Mother passed away. Who will shield me from the wind?

Rīga, 1987/88

MEMORIES THAT DO NOT FADE

Kārlis Kalniņš

THE ARREST

A very worried mother-in-law woke me and my wife very late on the night of 26 June, 1946. The lights were on in all the rooms. Two uniformed men and our janitor, his eyes downcast, were standing near our bed. The military men were from the Soviet Secret Police: Kravchenko, the department chief, and Vamže, the interrogator. Because that day my wife and I had returned from a business trip to Bauska and had also been celebrating the Midsummer Festival, we hadn't heard the repeated ringing and banging on the door. My mother-in-law said quietly, «The Chekists are here.»

We got dressed in the presence of these men. I was shown a warrant written in Russian to search our apartment. A thorough search was carried out – they leafed through all the books, went through our clothes including the pockets, and looked in the wardrobe and under the beds. They found a calendar with a picture of Hitler. This page was ripped out and trodden on. The superintendent went down with the janitor to the basement to check our firewood shed. The investigator gave me a note written by my brother and asked me to read it silently. I pretended

I hadn't heard this directive, read the text aloud and exclaimed that it was clear what condition my brother was in, if he could write such nonsense, i.e. tell me to hand in the hidden weapons. I was about to tear up the note, but the militiamen didn't let me and took it off me. The pennant in the colours of the Latvian flag that was on my desk, as well as the programme for a scientists' conference, to which I had been invited as a delegate from work, were taken as concrete evidence. At that time I was employed as an inspector in the Kurzeme Forest Protection Service. In my presence a report was drawn up that a search had been carried out and nothing of a compromising nature had been found. I filled in the order for my arrest. I refused to sign the report, saying that I didn't know any Russian, whereupon the interrogator began to translate it. I pointed out to him that the person who has written a report is not allowed to translate it, his colleague should do it, but the latter didn't know any Latvian at all. The janitor came to the rescue and translated the report, albeit very badly. My passport, work certificate and high school graduation certificate were added to my file. After the war I had recommenced my studies and was about to hand in my thesis and gain a diploma in Engineering (Forestry). And so I didn't finish university. I started to empty the contents of my pocket onto the table: a wallet, a notebook and a watch, but I forgot to take off my wedding ring, which was later confiscated as a valuable. The Chekists told me to hurry, adding that I wouldn't be under arrest for long. There was enough time for my wife to pack me some food, and for me to write a letter authorising her to receive my salary. I said good-bye to my wife and mother-in-law and set off for the Cheka. We got into a car that was waiting at the front door and drove off at high speed to «the tall building».

AT THE CHEKA

At that time the State Security Service was located on the corner of Brivibas and Stabu Streets. This building was known as the «tallest» in Riga. Those who found themselves there «saw» Siberia if they were lucky; many, however, saw the next world.

Even during my arrest I felt that the interrogator didn't like my manner. The interrogation didn't improve our relationship. I was taken into a room where several militiamen were already waiting. One of them, the most senior, I think, ordered me to get undressed and squat now and again. Meanwhile he was diligently sharpening a big dagger. After quite a while he used it to cut all the buttons off my clothes, removed my shoelaces, took my belt and made me take off my wedding ring. All these items were put in a little heap on the table. That was the last time I saw them. When I got dressed, I was given instructions on how to move around at the Cheka and how to behave. You were not allowed to talk, you had to walk with your head down and without looking left, right or ahead, and you had to keep your hands with fingers interlocked behind your back. If you met another prisoner, you had to turn your face toward the wall and resume the previous position only on your guard's orders.

It was very difficult the first time I went somewhere. My shoes, not having any shoelaces, kept falling off, and the force of gravity was having its effect on my trousers, but somehow I managed to reach the third cell. This cell was already overcrowded with potential wreckers of the new order. The room was a couple of metres wide and slightly longer. The exterior wall had a small, barred window, and the door leading to the corridor had a small opening with a shutter. In the wall facing the corridor was a smallish, round window, the so-called «guard's eye». The turnkey would

very quietly open this peephole and look to see if everything was in order inside the cell. During the day we sat on the concrete floor and slept on it at night. We were not given any bedclothes. There was one piece of «furniture» in the cell – a latrine bucket, the so-called «parasha», for all the inmates of the cell when nature called. Only quiet, whispered conversation was permitted.

I had scarcely had time to get to know my cell mates (every newcomer was questioned in detail to make sure he wasn't a «stukach»¹), when the small shutter opened and a guard's head appeared. Those whose surnames started with K had to go up to him one by one and softly give their name. When the right one had been found, the door opened and the «guilty» one was taken to the usual nocturnal activity, i.e. interrogation.

The interrogator was already waiting for me. I was told to sit down, with my hands behind me. The room was considerably larger than cell No. 3. The interrogator was sitting behind a desk. There was a pistol on the desk near his right hand. The interrogation began with the usual questions: where I lived, my work, education, marital status, my parents', wife's and brothers' occupation, and what I had done during the war. Why hadn't I taken part in the partisans' struggle against the German occupation? The pauses between questions were quite long.

Before the interrogation I was warned to tell the truth and nothing but the truth, otherwise I might be shot like a dog. The interrogator suspected that I wasn't taking him seriously, and that he couldn't intimidate me with such threats. When asked what I knew about the bandit, Voldemārs Kalniņš, I replied that I had a

¹ «*Stukach*» – an informer; in Russian the word means «the one who knocks». An informer knocked on the prison cell wall to indicate that he had gathered some information that could be used against the cell inmates.

brother named Voldemārs Kalniņš, but didn't know a bandit called Voldemārs Kalniņš. He took no notice of that and continued to write «the bandit, Voldemārs Kalniņš».

As was well known, both the interrogator and the person interrogated had to sign at the bottom of every page of the minutes of the interrogation. The text had to be corrected and the corrections countersigned by both of us. Again I was threatened that I would be shot and my wife would be arrested. When the minutes of the night interrogations were finally signed, I was taken to the cell for «a rest».

I had hardly fallen asleep when the order to get up resounded in the corridor. After a while the cell door opened and we went to wash ourselves, taking along the latrine bucket, which had to be emptied and rinsed. Everything was done in great haste.

Breakfast was handed out soon after. I wasn't as yet on the list of those to be fed by the Cheka. After breakfast we were taken out for a walk. The exercise yard was a small concrete area surrounded by brick walls. We were permitted to move around, look up at the sky, but conversation was forbidden. We felt the vast difference between the air outside and the stuffiness in the cell. As none of us had a watch, we couldn't determine how long we were outdoors, but it seemed a very short time.

Back in the cell, we returned to the everyday prison routine. I was the latest «addition» to the cell and was eagerly questioned about the political situation in Latvia and the world. We were allowed to play chess in the cell. The penalty for sleeping at an unauthorised time, however, was solitary confinement. Nevertheless, those who had spent the night with the interrogator managed to get some sleep by sitting at the chess table with their backs to the corridor, that is, to the wall with the peephole. The other chess player sat opposite him and moved the pieces while his opponent slept.

The following night I had to see the interrogator again, and so it went on the whole time I was at the Cheka. On the second day I was already enjoying the «delicacies» of the Cheka – something made with millet, I don't remember what else. We didn't get enough to eat, but didn't starve, either.

The interrogator kept on reminding me that those who admitted their guilt and revealed everything, i.e. agreed with the story the interrogator had fabricated, would be either released or given a very light sentence. On this point we disagreed. Because the Chekist had already noticed that my wife was expecting a baby, his threats to arrest her as well increased. I couldn't understand why he needed my «help» in the case against the group accused, for after all I was in no way involved. Obviously his mind was made up. When he told me that a meeting would be arranged, in which I would have to identify my brother, I pointed out to him that Soviet law did not provide for such a procedure between family members. Naturally Vamže took no notice of that. The meeting took place. After it the interrogator punched me very hard on the right ear as he went past. My ear began to ache afterwards, and I noticed that I could hear only with my left one. When I returned to my cell, it was obvious that I had a perforated eardrum. I wrote a report about this incident to the supervisor of the Cheka, adding that I would no longer answer the interrogator's questions.

When I was taken to the interrogator the next night, Kravchenko was also there. It was explained to me that life in Central Prison would be much better than here at the Cheka (that was the only time they told the truth). If my interrogator was changed, the investigation would continue for a long time and the rest of the group would curse me. Irrespective of the course the investigation took, a panel of doctors would be sent to look into my complaint.

I agreed that Vamže should wrap up my case, for I was convinced that as long as I was being interrogated, my wife would be, too, and for that reason I was eager not to prolong this tragicomedy.

One evening I was transferred from cell No. 3 to cell No. 7, which was full of an unpleasant vapour. Rumour had it that the cell was connected to the garage. You couldn't see anything, even though there was a light bulb on the ceiling. The walls and floor were wet. I was the only occupant of this room, and I felt very tense. I don't know who gave the order for me to be put in this «luxurious» cell. I was given a sheet of plywood to sleep on. That was my bed in this infernal darkness. When I was allowed to return to cell No. 3 the following evening, I had almost completely lost the ability to speak.

One day I was again summoned to the interrogator's room. He asked me to read my wife's statement that I'd had trouble hearing with my right ear even before being arrested. Many years later the story behind this piece of writing was revealed. The interrogator had once again summoned my wife to the Cheka. He had been extremely pleasant and had told her that I would definitely be found guilty, but the sentence wouldn't be harsh. I wouldn't be sent out of Latvia if I was in some way physically handicapped. When my wife had assured him that my health had been perfect before the arrest, he had commented that it still was. But then he asked her if I had perhaps been hard of hearing. My wife had taken the hint. He advised her to write a statement to the effect that I couldn't hear well with the right ear, he would write the same, and that would ensure that I served my sentence in Latvia.

Soon after that I was transferred to Central Prison. A Mr Jēkabsons and his son, both former forest workers, were there, too. The cell here was much larger, you could even call it a room. The windows had bars on the inside, but on the outside the shutters were

left open in such a way as to allow sufficient daylight to stream in through the top part. There was a table in the middle of the room. I think there was also a cupboard. The toilet was in another room. If you needed to use it, you knocked on the door and the guard on duty gave you permission. There was roll call in the morning and evening, at which you had to state your name and surname.

The prisoners had to clean the room themselves. Climbing up on the windowsill was a serious breach of regulations. We were allowed to converse in a loud voice and sing also, and were never reprimanded for doing it too loudly.

Mr Zariņš, an engineer, was in this cell. He had tuberculosis. Before his arrest, he had worked at VEF (the State Electrotechnical Factory). He told us that in that factory, too, a large number of arrests had been made after the war.

I had already spent a month in Central Prison when I was finally called before the promised panel of medical experts. First of all I was invited to a discussion with an interrogator, who wasn't the one who had hit me. He asked me if I wanted my case to be looked into again, or if I was satisfied with the progress of the investigation. Knowing what life at the Cheka was like, I was naturally satisfied with the present investigation. The panel of experts included the Cheka doctor; Dr Rozenbergs, an ear specialist from the University of Latvia; Mr Šmits, the chief of the Cheka; and the aforementioned interrogator.

After a discussion with the interrogator, only Dr Rozenbergs attended to me. He diagnosed a perforated eardrum, but said that it was not possible to determine the cause or time of the injury. That was the end of the experts' examination. So everything matched up perfectly with the statement that I'd had trouble with my right ear even before the arrest. I realised that this was a solution the

interrogator had thought out carefully beforehand. All I could do was wait for my case to go before the court.

The court was said to be very harsh, but no-one had heard it being called just. The convicted persons were not brought back to the same cells, so for that reason there was a continual turnover of inmates. A rumour was going around that the pleasant engineer from our cell had been given the severest sentence possible, but because he was gravely ill with tuberculosis, we thought he had died of natural causes, saving the Chekists one bullet that way.

If a scrap of newspaper happened to find its way into the cell, we would learn the content off by heart like studious school-children. Most prisoners received parcels – «puddings». They were called that because their contents were scrupulously checked and consequently thoroughly jumbled.

However, some prisoners had to live on what the state provided. The «wealthy» cell mates helped them to alleviate their hunger. These cells also had stool pigeons sent in, because there were also discussions about the charges before a hearing and also about what one had managed to conceal from the interrogator. Obviously spying in the Cheka as well as the prison was of a high standard. After all, this vice was widespread among the free citizens also.

THE TRIBUNAL

At the end of August 1946, under strict guard, we were herded into court. I don't know whether it could have been called a tribunal. Rather it was a farce with a sad ending as far as the accused were concerned. The members of the tribunal knew how these boring days would end, and the outcome had been decided during the investigation.

ob We were led into a waiting room in the basement of the courthouse. Two sailors were being tried just then. They had raped and shot a woman. The brother of one of the accused had arrived from Leningrad, as well as both men's other relatives. This bunch of people felt at ease and behaved as if they were at a celebration. While waiting for the end of the lengthy trial, they drank bottle after bottle of spirits and ate various delicacies. All this took place in the corridor. The guards were also offered food and drink. When the convicted men were brought down to the basement, they got a heroes' welcome, for apparently the one who had shot the woman had been sentenced to 4½ years in prison, and the other one to even less. We got the impression that the court wasn't keen on handing out harsh sentences. Unfortunately it turned out that the triumvirate wasn't fond of uniformity.

b We had to face the court the same way one goes to Holy Communion – with empty stomachs. As soon as we had been told where to sit, the order was given to stand. Then the court proceedings began and the accusations against us were read. The secretary did that. There was a great deal to read. It seemed as if an investigator was paid by the number of pages he had written and the number of persons convicted, the judges, on the other hand, by the number of years they sentenced a person to. Vamže, the interrogator of our group of people, was also in the courtroom, as were the lawyers for the defence. It took two days to read the charges against us. At the end of each day we were taken back to Central Prison. We were then given the food we hadn't received during the day. After two days the trial was adjourned until the following Monday because the court staff had Sundays off.

o The tribunal consisted of a chairman (a major, I think), two assistants (a junior lieutenant and a young woman in uniform) and a secretary, the only one who was busy doing something the first

two days. I think there was also a public prosecutor, but his role must have been minimal, for I don't recall anything about him. While the charges were being read, my accusers were trying to entertain each other by having jovial conversation. The assisting couple were especially garrulous.

The magistrates spoke only in Russian, we spoke Latvian. The secretary acted as interpreter. We, the accused, fully realised that during these three days our fate would be sealed not only for the near future, but perhaps even for life, and not only our fate, but that of our families as well.

On the last day of the trial, the chairman of the tribunal showed some interest – he asked several questions and pronounced the verdict.

It's not easy to prove that the accusations against you are false. It was common knowledge that a trial proceeded according to Vishinsky's² doctrine, i.e. if you cannot prove that you are not guilty, you are definitely guilty. Physical force, such as beatings, was used during an interrogation. By the time the accused appeared before the war tribunal, he had become totally apathetic to everything around him and had even begun to believe the interrogator's promises.

I think there were 17 people in our group. There was an artist, an invalid, who was accused of making a very good replica of an official stamp. Balodis, a medical student, was on trial for treasonable thoughts such as «What would happen if the rostrums on Victory Square were blown up?» He had spoken about it to an ex-soldier of the Latvian Legion³. Both of them were given the

² *Andrei Vishinsky*, 1883-1954, was Foreign Minister of the USSR in 1940-1954.

³ *Latvian Legion* – legion of young conscripted Latvians set up by the Nazi German occupation forces in Latvia in 1943 to help them in their war effort on the Eastern front.

death penalty. As we found out later, it was carried out. Jēkabsons and his son were accused of aiding bandits. On their way to work in the forest, they had bought some bread on their ration cards, about one and a half loaves of black bread. Some men with machine guns had come out of the forest and demanded the bread. The Jēkabsons had not resisted the partisans, therefore they had aided and abetted them. Jēkabsons senior received 7 years in a hard labour camp and a further 3 years disenfranchisement and exile. He served his sentence in Kolyma with me.

However, the nucleus of the group seemed to consist of former Latvian soldiers in the German army. After Germany's capitulation, they knew how brutally the USSR treated prisoners of war. They were also convinced that the USA would take advantage of the extremely serious food shortage in the USSR and demand a restoration of Latvia's independence, for the USA did not recognise Latvia's incorporation into the USSR. So in summer, a group of soldiers my brother had fought with in the war, went into hiding in the forests. They picked berries and cut hay for the local inhabitants, and in that way obtained enough food to survive. Time passed, but there was no sign of the longed-for freedom, because the then president of America acceded to all of Stalin's demands and not to the wishes of the Prime Minister of England.

In the winter of 1945/46 my brother Voldemārs occasionally visited me. He told me that he was working on a privately owned farm in Jūrmala.

Spring came in all its splendour, but without the political changes everyone had eagerly been waiting for. People were still being hunted down, Chekists and war tribunals were kept busy. They got great help in their work from the large contingent of Party organs.

During the trial it was revealed that Bērziņš, a member of our group, had a diary. It contained descriptions of war-time events at the front. This was the pretext for arresting all the members of the group. My brother, for example, was sentenced mainly for obstructing the Red Army's battle operations. The incident was described in the diary as follows: under my brother's leadership, communication lines were being installed, when suddenly they had seen Russian soldiers approaching, and my brother had given the order to take up battle positions. They had repulsed the attack. My brother was sentenced to 15 years' hard labour. Bērziņš, the author of the diary, had given it to a girl he was seeing, but later had started going out with another girl. The diary was handed over to the Cheka in revenge for his unfaithfulness. At the trial, Bērziņš was called as a witness against the other members of the group. When asked which of the accused he knew, he said he had never seen me before. So the charge against me of belonging to this group was dropped, but that of allowing my brother to work on a privately owned farm remained. Out of love for my brother I had tried to save him from a fate that befell many partisans – they were shot, or at best loaded onto cattle wagons and transported to an unknown, distant destination. That was also why only a small number of partisans sought amnesty. The government of Soviet Latvia published calls in newspapers to those who were living illegally, promising that they wouldn't be tried if they registered voluntarily, but of course the Cheka acted according to Stalin's and Beria's instructions. The manager of the privately run farm was sentenced to 10 years' hard labour for employing several former partisans.

The tribunal, i.e. a triumvirate, consulted for a few minutes, and then read the verdict (probably prepared beforehand) that the

accused were guilty as charged. The punishment varied: between 3½ and 10 years in a corrective labour camp; between 15 and 25 year hard labour; and two people were sentenced to death. Everyone received a copy of the sentence (with dates adjusted). After the sentences were read, the ones who had got a death sentence were handcuffed, the rest returned to Central Prison under heavy guard. We were put into a cell in a special section. Any appeal against the verdict had to be written the following day. Most sentences were considerably reduced on appeal. Mine was decreased from 10 to 7 years, and my brother's 15 years' hard labour were reduced to 10 years in a labour camp. In addition, every person convicted was given additional punishment – exile and disenfranchisement for several years. All the accused had a defence lawyer. Mine was a woman by the name of Ūdre. She only pointed out that I was young and could still reform, and for that reason requested that I be given a light sentence.

In the cell for the convicted was a table, benches and metal cots. During the day the cots were folded against the wall. There were not enough of them, so I slept on the floor. On the whole, this cell was exactly like the previous one.

Once a month, with the prison supervisor's permission, we were allowed visits by our relatives, but we had to notify them about the time of the meeting. The meeting took place in a special room separated by two wire barriers. A guard would walk between the barriers and listen to the conversations attentively. Several conversations were going on at the same time. They lasted about 10 or 15 minutes. They were gloomy.

Searches were frequently carried out in the cells. If a razor blade or some other metal object was found hidden away and the guilty person did not own up, all the cell prisoners were

punished – visits and parcels were forbidden for two weeks or even a whole month.

Prisoners cleaned the prison and distributed the bread rations in the morning. The bread was put outside single cells, i.e. those occupied by prisoners sentenced to death. However, if no bread was to be put outside one of these cells, it meant that the person had been shot during the night. On these occasions several cells were usually empty. We could tell the number of people shot by the empty cells. We would be very depressed for many days.

There was a chess set in the cell, which was used all day long. We could borrow books from the prison library. But chess, books and letters were not enough to make our day interesting. We knew that our families had also been «sentenced», and that it was even more difficult for them.

One day carpenters were required and I volunteered. The task was making chairs. The quota could be exceeded and we worked in three shifts. The workers were accommodated in a separate room, where we slept on double bunks equipped with bedclothes. We had our meals in the canteen and could shower after work. More frequent visits by family members were also allowed. During the visits we were separated by only one wire fence and no-one listened in to our conversation.

My companions were from various walks of life. There was a lawyer, a diplomat, a chess champion, a general, a war correspondent, a captain and others. Quite a few were school students. After work they had lessons given by convicted teachers.

Many among us were excellent chess players and competitions were often organised, but, because players changed so often, it was never clear who the winner was. I played in my free time, too, and read books. There was a well-stocked library in the

prison. Books could be sent in to us, but they were not to be taken out. We were not paid for the work done, and meals consisted of the usual prison food.

At the beginning of February I received a letter from my wife telling me that she had had twins – a son, Andris and a daughter, Ilze. I was very happy about the arrival of our first-born children, but at the same time miserable that I wouldn't be able to help bring them up. My mother-in-law had died shortly before they were born. Her death had upset Herta, my wife, very much, as now she was alone in the apartment with the children. Naturally she was overwhelmed by grief for her mother, who had been by her side during this difficult time. But in her letters to me she spoke of a fairly normal future, which was meant to stop me from worrying.

The spring of 1947 arrived. One sunny day we were ordered to gather our belongings and line up in the yard. We were herded to the Šķirotava station and loaded onto cattle wagons that had been prepared beforehand for transporting prisoners. Some of us had to lie on the floor, others on the shelves. We were crammed in like sardines in a can. A crowd gathered near the train. They must have found out we were being deported. We all tried to write a note to our relatives. Although we'd had to leave paper and writing implements in Central Prison, I had kept the stub of a pencil, as had the other deportees. But we had trouble finding paper, so we wrote on cigarette paper. The notes were thrown out through the small barred window. When the train had departed, the people who had «seen us off» had picked them up and delivered or mailed them on that same day. Thank you, kind people!

CROSSING THE BORDER

We did not talk, for every one of us was leaving loved ones behind and the memories of days gone by. We did not know what the future held for us or our relatives. Such were the thoughts that occupied each of us.

Three soldiers «visited» us on the very first night. They made us move to one end of the wagon and very carefully examined the area vacated as well as our clothes. They banged on the walls, the floor and the ceiling with hammers. The wagon was checked in this fashion every night. The wagons were not lit except with a torch during these checks. The train had a kitchen, and we were fed fairly regularly, but poorly. We travelled through larger towns at night. Molotov (now called Perm) was an exception. School-children and their teachers «welcomed» us there. The boys attempted to teach us a lesson by throwing stones, some of which flew in through the small windows. Luckily there were no casualties. The teachers gave directions and the rest yelled, «Death to the fascists, death to the murderers!» That was the only time during the journey that we were treated in this way.

As the train travelled on, we saw that the Soviet postwar «agricultural machinery» was hard at work in the fields – one woman guiding a plough, two pulling it. Here and there oxen were working. The greatest surprise were the numerous camps and houses without any trees or bushes around them. We couldn't understand why there were no fruit trees or flowerbeds, or why gardens weren't fenced in.

This was most obvious beyond the Ural Mountains. Our route was Riga – Molotov – Sverdlovsk – Omsk – Novosibirsk – Krasnoyarsk – Irkutsk – Komsomolsk on the Amur River, and the port of

Vanino. Once during the journey we were taken to a communal bath-house, in Irkutsk, I think.

On its way around Lake Baikal, the train passed through a dark tunnel for several minutes. At first we couldn't understand why day had suddenly turned into night. In Komsomolsk the whole train was ferried across the Amur River. On the other side of the river, two locomotives pulled the train up the hill. Japanese prisoners of war are said to have built this stretch of the railway. A large number of them died there.

In Vanino we were put into camp barracks. It was there that we first got to know the «blatnye»⁴, animals in the guise of human beings. They were well fed and clothed, and hand in glove with the camp administration and guards. The members of this gang were criminals. In the Vanino camp, the prisoners were to be put into groups and sent to Magadan in the Kolyma region. The «blatnye» first of all went through the clothes and pockets of every deportee, in fact undressed us. Then they tossed back some rags. They took away the photographs of our family members, fiancées and so on. If anyone showed even the slightest displeasure, he was «softened» right there in front of everyone – one of them seized the victim by the head, another by the legs, lifted him up and threw him on his back on the floor. This was done a number of times. After that they jumped on the victim's stomach. There were also vicious fights between the «blatnye» and the political prisoners. The former always won because the supervisors and guards were their accomplices.

People of different nationalities were in this transit prison – Latvians, Estonians, Lithuanians, Ukrainians, Byelorussians,

⁴ In Russian slang, *blatnye* means «hardened criminals».

Kabardins, Chinese, Japanese, and several Russians. In Magadan we were joined by Kazakhs, Armenians, Tatars, Germans from the Volga region, Azerbaidjanis and other nationalities. It seemed as if the inhabitants of all the countries on the planet were enjoying the hospitality of prison camps.

After being given rations of herrings and bread for five days, we were driven on foot to the port, where we were put on board the «Hercogs Jēkabs», a cargo ship Latvians were familiar with. Now the ship was named «Sovetskaya Latvia». It took a long time, from morning till evening, to load thousands of prisoners onto the ship. It was overcrowded, the heat unbearable, the air stifling and the room poorly lit. I would never have imagined that I would be travelling in such conditions on independent Latvia's most modern diesel ship.

We had been travelling for many hours when we were woken by the shaking of the ship. We thought it was taking in water. It turned out that it had run aground and had developed a leak. It couldn't move off the shallows under its own steam. Help arrived, our ship was set afloat and taken back to the Vanino port, where after two days it was repaired and our journey to Kolyma could continue. We were told that enough food and water had been put on board. This proved to be untrue – there was no extra food. For eight days we had to make do with rations that were meant for five days. We survived, of course, but lost a lot of weight. On board the ship we were again frisked and cleaned out. The dead were thrown overboard, to be devoured by sharks. We arrived in Magadan starving and suffering from a lack of fresh air.

It had been warm when we left Vanino, but here it was still winter. A vehicle with footwear and clothing was waiting for us, because many were wearing nothing but sports shorts. Once more

we were in a transit camp with new footwear and clothes, but before we had time to try them on, the «blatnye» had us wearing rags. After a few days we were put into groups and taken to labour camps. Our group was transported in a coal truck with an uneven, dirty floor. We were packed into this tin box like sardines. We had to sit down on a shouted command; however, a third remained standing, for there was not enough room. It was a sunny day and the heat in the tin box grew unbearable. It seemed as if we had been travelling for a long time, but finally the truck stopped and we were let out into the fresh air. Nevertheless, some had lost consciousness. They were carried out and water was poured straight on their heads. We were given some water to drink. The journey continued until the evening. The night was spent in a transit camp. While a meal was being prepared, most of us were sound asleep and food no longer mattered.

The journey continued the next morning. We spent that night in the port town of Neru, where again we had a wash in a bathhouse and were given some clothes. After resting for a day, we set off for the coalmining camp of Pokrishkin, 200 kilometres away. The rations for the three-day walk were a couple of salted herrings and some salty bread. An exhausting trek in the Siberian taiga began. The convoy guard explained that we had to reach our destination in four days but, if we arrived earlier, we would be able to rest for a day.

That evening we were offered a rest on the other side of a distant hill. It wasn't far, we were told. We trudged on and on, but didn't get any nearer. When we reached the top, we felt really cold, for there was snow on the ground and a strong wind was blowing. Fortunately it was warm and pleasant at the foot of the hill. We broke off some branches and lay down on them (the

ground was still cold). We hid what bread we still had so that it wouldn't be stolen, because in Neru we had seen many prisoners, who were being transported in stages from camp to camp, exchange their rations for tobacco. We weren't allowed to rest for long. When we got up, none of the men from the Baltic countries had a crumb of bread left. The smokers were grinning, eating bread and sniggering at our «misfortune». We, the victims, felt twice as hungry. This base act was not the work of the «blatnye». The thieves' deftness was impressive, but that didn't help our empty stomachs.

Some prisoners got diarrhoea. At the start of our trek they were allowed to fall behind and relieve themselves, but later on the healthy ones continued on their way while a sick man stayed behind with a guard. It seemed that he knew what fate awaited him, because he implored the others not to leave him. Soon after, the echo of a shot resounded in the taiga, and after a few minutes the guard rejoined the column. The size of our group decreased in this way by several prisoners. Even today I think I can hear those piteous cries. The memory will probably never fade.

Exhausted, starving and depressed, we arrived at the Pokrishkin prison camp. Our spirits lifted slightly when we were given a meal. We noticed that the construction of the camp was not finished. We were organised into work brigades and allocated barracks. These had double bunks and tiny windows without panes. We had to sleep on rough-hewn boards. No sleeping mats, blankets, pillows or bedclothes were issued. We slept in twos – one person's clothes were used to sleep on, the other's to cover ourselves with. We had no underwear, that had been taken from us on the way here.

The temperature at night fell to below zero, but rose to well above that during the day. Breakfast was in the canteen. We had

to stand outside the door in the cold for at least an hour until it was our turn. Then in separate work brigades and according to a list, we were taken straight to work. As you went out through the gate, you had to say your surname, given name and patronymic in Russian, and likewise on your return to the camp. We were under strict guard both in the camp and outside.

If there were three shifts, those on day shift would make a detour of a couple of kilometres and take some building materials or firewood back to the camp. In the first week we were given short rations because in Neru we had received food for five days, but had reached Pokrishkin in three. This did not add to our capacity to work, in fact we were soon not able to work at all. The rations varied according to the work done. Quite frequently the brigade leader authorised a person he liked to be given more food than someone who worked harder. Our job was to take wheelbarrows with ore along narrow planks to a gold-panning installation. Those who had used up all their energy reserves were given lighter work, usually carrying firewood, helping on a construction site, or they would be put in the clinic to recover.

The brigade leader had one or two helpers, who followed his orders and taught workers a lesson if he thought they weren't working hard enough. The beatings were merciless. I remember one occasion when one of us was stripped naked and doused with water. We had been on night shift. Because the nights here were cool and there were countless mosquitoes, that night was most likely the last on this earth for the «punished» man.

Occasionally, when the equipment was out of order, we scoured the area for gold. If we were lucky enough to find a nugget and hide it from the convoy guard, there was a chance of getting a bowl of soup or even a kilo of bread from the camp cook. Sometimes he

would throw in a ladleful of gruel. Usually you could get a bowl of soup or gruel for a 20 g nugget, and a kilo of bread for a 100 g nugget.

August days were very hot with temperatures rising above 35°C. During this month the sun did not set, it was the Arctic day. The end of September brought rain and snow. Mittens hadn't been supplied yet, so we used to come back to the camp soaked through and cold. In these conditions everyone was soon worn out. If anyone lost consciousness even a couple of kilometres from the camp, it meant a farewell to this world. I also had such an experience, but fortunately it happened near the camp gate. When I had recovered a little after being unconscious for two days, I was assigned to the firewood brigade. Snow had already fallen and it was getting colder. We were living in a tent that was packed in with snow. Inside, a fire was constantly kept burning in an empty kerosene drum, yet the temperature was around zero. We were given winter clothing – padded jackets, mittens, a winter hat and felt boots. They were second-hand and well worn.

Because of a lack of vitamins, I suffered from scurvy. My knees ached dreadfully. As long as they just ached but were not swollen, no leave from work was given. My teeth became loose also. A syrupy, disgusting infusion of pine needles was given for scurvy. It was compulsory to drink it before lunch. After taking this dose of «vitamins», you perspired so heavily that your whole body was soaked.

Eventually I was recognised as being ill. I was given the job of watchman in the first-aid clinic. The work was easy. I had to make sure that no unauthorised person entered the clinic at night. In addition to the pine needle infusion, I got a spoonful of cod liver oil every day. Soon I was considered fit enough to work in the firewood brigade.

Many people suffered from diarrhoea, which usually caused death because there was no medicine that could save the debilitated prisoners. The medical staff consisted of political prisoners. They were experts in their field, but there was no medicine.

Each day the number of patients to be discharged was determined by the camp authorities. Quite often smokers exchanged their bread ration for cigarettes, and that finished them off fast. Our dying «army» was constantly replaced by «brothers» of various nationalities.

There were a lot of bedbugs in the barracks. We couldn't sleep at night, despite scattering so much naphthalene on our beds that they were white. When the cold weather set in, blankets were issued, but we still had no bedclothes or underwear. As our strength petered out, we could no longer meet the work quota, and so the food rations were decreased. Soon I had no energy again and was utterly spent. We didn't go out to work because the harsh Kolyma winter with temperatures between -50°C and -60°C had set in.

For the first time in my life I experienced the Arctic night.

I was moved into the barracks for the non-working prisoners. With each passing day, food rations became poorer. The room was heated only twice a day, once when the doctors were doing the rounds, and the second time when a check was carried out. An empty drum with a flue stood in the middle of the barrack. It was filled with firewood, or rather twigs that, when lit, gave out intense heat within a few minutes. The room would become pleasantly warm. But no sooner had it warmed up than it cooled down again, and we felt warm for ten minutes twice a day. The rest of the time the temperature was either around or below zero. We slept on two metal beds, four people on each. Two mattresses and one blanket were used to lie on, and three blankets and two

mattresses were used to cover ourselves. Going to the toilet was very unpleasant – we went naked, groping along the walls.

Our food rations consisted of about a glassful of water and 200 g – 300 g of a «soup» that contained nothing but a couple of cabbage leaves and no fat at all. Once a week 300 g of bread made from soya flour were doled out. We were starving and totally emaciated. Only one thing was on our minds – how to get enough food.

When the Arctic night ended, the food improved, although we still didn't have to go out to work. We were given oatmeal bread and oat grain porridge, and there was no shortage of herrings. We got all the rations that had been withheld during the winter.

Work in the mines began. While the ground was still frozen, the ore containing gold was brought to the surface. The shafts were located deep down and were several kilometres long. Work there stopped only when the temperature above ground was -50°C or lower. Miners received better clothing and food.

Spring comes suddenly in Kolyma. By 1948 I was working progressively less in the shafts, and the following winter and spring I was often ill. I had lost a lot of weight, so the doctors decided to send me to hospital in Debina, which was on the left bank of the Kolyma River. There I was diagnosed as having a large number of spots on my lungs (silicosis) and as showing signs of tuberculosis. I was transferred 700–800 km south-east of Pokrishkin. It was much warmer there. I rapidly recovered and, as was later confirmed, my lung condition was no longer life threatening.

One night we felt the hospital rocking and heard a muffled rumble. The next morning the walls had cracks in them and some doors wouldn't close. An earthquake had struck during the night.

Prisoners as well as the other inhabitants of Kolyma were treated in the hospital. Most of the doctors were free citizens, only a few

were deportees. The patient in the next ward was the former doctor-in-charge. On his walks he had noticed, he said, that I was a good chess player, and invited me to be his partner. We became friends, and every day I had to play several games, during which he treated me to some good food and fresh milk. This went on for more than a month, until late one evening the doctor-in-charge at the time «visited» us. Apparently she had forbidden my partner to play chess. That night she had noticed the light in the doctor's room and thinking that he was feeling ill, had hastened to check on him. The following morning I was discharged from hospital and assigned to work again. I had to join a group of Estonians who were making cane furniture. It was good there.

One day all those who had ever held a scythe in their hands were signed up. I was included on this list. Apparently the hospital kept cows, and fodder for the winter had to be prepared for them. A couple of days later we were taken to some place, under convoy guard, of course. Some free citizens, representatives from the hospital, were among us, too. We were offloaded on the bank of the river, in the middle of a sweeping meadow. One of us was given the job of cooking.

We lived in tents. The weather was warm. To at least partly repel the mosquito attacks, we worked with gloves on and covered our faces with mosquito netting. In our spare time we sat around a camp fire – the mosquitoes didn't like the smoke. As in the camp, there were inspections in the evenings, but for the rest of the time someone from the hospital supervised us and allocated tasks. There wasn't enough food, yet we weren't starving. In all the time I spent in labour camps, the period while I was in hospital and making hay has remained in my memory as the best.

VORKUTA IN THE SUMMER OF 1953

Jānis Zīle

Jānis Zīle was born in 1928 into an old farming family in the district of Kocēni. He attended the local primary school and commenced high school in Cēsis. During the Second World War he and his parents sought refuge in Kurzeme as the Russian front approached. On returning to their home after the war, the village soviet did not allow them to return to their ancestral property. Years of having to move from place to place in Latvia began. Zīle was able to return to high school with the help of his uncle, who paid the school fees. In 1949, Zīle was arrested and sentenced by default to 10 years imprisonment. His «crime»: being a member of an illegal students' literary group. The sentence passed on him prohibited Zīle from ever undertaking any writing. He served his sentence in the mines of Vorkuta. In 1956 he was released and allowed to return to Latvia. In that same year, Zīle enrolled in the Valmiera Young Workers Evening College and, in 1958, in the Science faculty of the Rīga Institute of Technology. After graduating, he worked successfully in the paint manufacturing industry, and his research was nominated for the «Prize of the Republic». Although he received a certificate of patent (No. 234 3383) for his invention, he never received this prize. He changed jobs and was also awarded a certificate of patent (No. 573012) for his new research project into the production methods of anti-cancer drugs. In 1974,

he lost his sight in a work-related accident, but partially regained his ability to see after eight years. Disregarding the condition of his sentence not to publish any literary works, he entered a competition for short stories and was awarded second prize. At present, Zile lives in Riga and receives an invalid pension.

VORKUTA IN THE SUMMER OF 1953

Father, do not forgive them their sins,
for they knew very well what they were doing.

August in Vorkuta that year was surprisingly warm and sunny. Stalin was dead, Beria had been shot, and yet, not one thing in Vorkuta had changed. In just the same way as it had been done twenty years earlier, columns of numbered prisoners, surrounded by convoys of guards and their dogs, set off for work in the mine shafts and returned to the camp to receive their piece of bread and watery soup. In just the same way as it had been shouted out twenty years earlier, the leader of the convoy warned the prisoners setting out for the day's work: «A step to the left or a step to the right and the guards will shoot without warning.»

Twenty years had passed. A strange anniversary.

In 1933, the first groups of prisoners had arrived at Vorkuta from Intlaga to begin construction of the mine shafts. Everything visible in 1953 had been constructed by the bare hands of prisoners, on the bones of the dead. According to the old «zeks» (prisoners), the construction of the Vorkuta-Kotlasa railway alone had cost the lives of one and a half million prisoners. But it is impossible to estimate how many more prisoners had lost their lives in the construction of the Vorkuta mines and other projects. That number is known

only to God, the NKVD, and the Party. The old zeks of Vorkuta tell that the dead are so many that they cannot be counted; the whole tundra is strewn with their bones.

In the beginning, both criminals and political prisoners served their sentences in the Vorkuta prison camps. In 1947, the criminals were moved out of Vorkuta and special units called «rechlags» were established in their place; these «rechlags» had a regime so strict that it was guaranteed to put a stop to any form of free thought.

Nevertheless, the prisoners of Vorkuta had never been peaceful and obedient. In 1946, the prisoners of the two eastern region camps, under the leadership of two colonels, rebelled and captured the arms of their guards. Fighting their oppressors, they began to make their way towards a passage which cuts through the Ural Mountains, so as to reach Siberia and start a rebellion there. Unreal? Fantastic? Yes, but a drowning man will clutch at even a straw. The battle raged all summer, the government of the USSR even enlisted the help of the air-force. The fighting ended only after the last zek had been killed.

In 1947, the prisoners of Camp No. 506 refused to go to the mines. The camp was surrounded by army and Interior Ministry troops. All of the prisoners were shot dead.

In 1948, the women of Kirpichnaya Camp No. 1 went on strike. About 5000 women were stripped naked and then shot on the banks of the Vorkuta River. The first company assigned to carry out this execution had refused to shoot. They were disarmed and themselves shot on the outskirts of Vorkuta.

This shows that, although prisoners were generally not held at the one camp for very long, this did not deter them from becoming united.

And so, in 1953 at Vorkuta, four months after the death of Stalin, everything remained the same: the dogs, the convoys, the «citizen supervisors» and the famine. Only the informers were missing. What had happened to the infamous informers, the «wankers», crooks and bastards and the rest of the riff-raff? They were all dead and buried. Many of them had killed one another in battles for supremacy, the rest had been killed by those they had oppressed. And so, in 1953, the «air» in the camps had been cleared. This, then, was the political situation in the camps of Vorkuta before the general strike began.

But first, a few details about the inhabitants of the camps. The so called «biomass» of the camps of Vorkuta consisted chiefly of Western Ukrainians – about 60%, Balts – about 30%, with the remaining 10% comprised of many nationalities: Volga Germans, Poles, Georgians, Tajiks and so on. There were so few Russians at the Vorkuta camps that they could be counted on the fingers of one hand. The Russian prisoners explained that this was because the new post World War II wave of repression had affected mainly the newly conquered territories (the Western Ukraine, the Baltic); only a few Russians had managed to survive the first wave of repression, which had occurred mainly in Russia. That may well have been true, since life at the camps was worthless.

It is difficult to say how the general strike began. All the mines at Vorkuta seemed to cease production simultaneously. One fine day, about fifty camps simply refused to go to work. This was not because of the will of God, or any directive of the KGB, or even a result of any action taken by the Party. It was entirely the result of the actions of the prisoners.

Here are some statistics about the labour camps of Vorkuta. In 1953, each of the camps of Vorkuta housed 5000 prisoners. Multiply this number by the number of camps: 50, and the result

is two hundred and fifty thousand souls. Consequently, in August, 1953, these 250,000 prisoners simultaneously began a political strike, demanding freedom. Work ceased in the coal mines and at the brick works, at the lime kilns and the cement works; in fact, everywhere where the prisoners were used as slave labour, prisoners laid down their tools and refused to work. What were the economic repercussions to the Soviet Union as a result of this strike? Enormous losses were the result. At the time, 25 coal mines producing 45,000 tons of high quality coal and coke essential for the metal industry, were operating at Vorkuta. All of these mines were now at a standstill. At the railway stations, the number of unloaded timber wagons increased, and so did the number of empty wagons meant to transport the coal to various destinations. And if that was not bad enough, the «bosses» were left without anyone to clean their offices or living quarters. Neither they, nor their wives, had ever done this type of work themselves. Such jobs were for the prisoners. It was a national disaster!

How had this situation been allowed to come about? Each camp had been completely isolated. Only two letters a year were allowed and these carefully censored. There were checks at the gates, searches in the barracks. And yet, the seemingly impossible had occurred. When and how had a system of intercommunication between the camps developed? Yet, such a network existed and functioned.

At this time I was at Yachaga Labour Camp. From our camp we could see not only TEC-2, the camp of Mine No. 29, but also the so-called «Little Camp», renowned for its rigorous conditions. The inmates of this latter camp were not even allowed to work, but were locked in their barracks at all times. Lastly, we could also see the camp of Mine No. 7, which was just an arm's length from us.

THE STRIKE

On the first day of the strike not much happened. The authorities were shocked, presumably waiting for directives from above about what action to take. The prisoners presented their demands to the authorities. They were nothing special. We did not even ask to be set free. We asked for a representative of the USSR government to visit us at the camps, so that the government could be made aware of our working and living conditions, as well as our personal grievances. However, such an act was unprecedented. The prisoners had dared to demand. This was an act of impudence never before experienced in the history of the «empire».

From the moment the strike was proclaimed, the responsibility for its internal organisation was undertaken by a strike committee made up of representatives of all the nationalities. On their part, the authorities retaliated with economic sanctions, namely, disconnecting the supply of drinking water to the camps and imposing a punishment regime – that is, 300 grams of bread a day. Full stop. Still, an order to remove all bedding and other items from the barracks was not issued, since they knew very well that such an order would be ignored. The situation with the supply of food was more serious. There was no bakery at our camp. Bread was transported daily from the village of Mine No. 7 in a cart pulled by a black and white ox; the camp authorities could give us as much as they pleased. The situation was the same with the supply of water, which was pumped to us from a lake adjacent to the village.

The authorities made their first counter-move that night. We committed a tactical error. The barracks were always locked after the evening roll call and unlocked only in the morning. We had allowed this to continue even now. The guards seized the

opportunity during the couple of hours of darkness to, one by one, unlock the barracks and seize the presumed leaders of the strike.

During the night, reinforcements had also arrived – army divisions which had been stationed at Vorkuta. Row upon row of well armed soldiers surrounded the camp, machine guns had been positioned in the guard towers, grenade launchers set up in the surrounding fields of the tundra.

Terrifying? No. For some reason all of the army, all of their arms did not frighten us. We had become accustomed to them.

After discovering what had happened during the night, we demanded the release of our friends. The punishment cell in which they had been imprisoned was situated in the southern corner of the camp, close to the fence. A machine gun manned by the activities supervisor of the camp, Senior Lieutenant Atrashkevitch, had been placed on the other side of the barbed wire fence.

There was hardly any warning. As a matter of fact none. Atrashkevitch was not an officer who talked to zeks. He probably considered this to be beneath his dignity.

«Disperse!»

But before we had time to react, the command «Fire!» rang out, and he had shot his pistol, aiming it at the nearest zek.

Immediately, machine gun fire began. Every pair of hands in which the authorities had placed a weapon joined in. Luckily for us, the guards manning the machine gun opposite the punishment cell fired above our heads, so that when Atrashkevitch himself grabbed control of the machine gun, we were already flat on the ground. Fierce fire continued to cut through the camp for about ten minutes. No-one knew who gave the command to cease firing. It definitely was not Atrashkevitch.

After the firing stopped, an eerie silence enveloped the camp. From time to time it was interrupted by the cries for help from the injured and by the moans of the dying.

Once again we were on our feet. If anyone had at this moment shouted «Brothers, forward!» we would have undoubtedly thrown ourselves recklessly onto the barbed wire and met with certain death. Luckily there was no such cry. Our officers quickly re-established discipline. We were gnashing our teeth in anger and in helplessness, but quickly submitted to their command. This saved us from needless death.

In silence we picked up our dead and took them to the morgue. The injured were taken to the hospital. Only then did we dry our tears. The dead numbered eight, the injured about thirty.

This sacrifice, however, had not been in vain. In all of the commotion, someone had managed to throw open the punishment cell door and our comrades were once again among us. We had also learned a lesson. We immediately removed the bars from the doors of the barracks. Now they could no longer be locked.

When time came to do the evening shift in the mines, we chose our own people to go out. And so a group of specially chosen «commandos» managed to seize control of the mine's explosives depots. The authorities had forgotten to guard these. Now we had the trump card and brazenly put it on the table.

«If you use arms against us again, we will blow up the mines!»

We understood that the first to die would be our own comrades and, after them, the rest of us. But this did not alarm anyone. We were leading a dog's life and no-one was going to hand us anything on a platter. We had to help ourselves. Any feelings of compassion, mercy, and love for fellow man were foreign to our oppressors. One has to be terribly self-confident to shove one's

boot in the face of a kneeling zek for it to be polished. And the citizen supervisors who did so were all Party members who could be trusted to carry out Party orders with pedantic precision.

The garrison of Vorkuta was stationed between the camps of Yachaga and Mine No. 7. The garrison was about fifty to sixty metres from the fence of our camp and, as a result, we had a clear view of everything that went on there. The tundra is a barren wasteland. There are no trees or large bushes to hide anything from view. Indeed, no attempt was made to hide anything from us. We saw new troops arrive at the garrison, and then march out singing as they went to initiate some new bloodbath. Whole companies with dogs, light tanks, fire engines, and other equipment had been assembled there so that the rebellion of the slaves of the 20th century could be suppressed with the least casualties.

The scene of dogs attacking and tearing flesh from live human beings is unimaginable. Is that not insanity: to set dogs upon live humans all the while singing «Wide and mighty is my native land»? But that is a whole new story.

We had not yet buried our dead when the rumour went around that the Supreme Commander of the troops of the Interior, Hero of the USSR, Lieutenant General Maslyennyikov had arrived at Vorkuta bringing with him two battalions of crack troops. And already, we could see these very troops standing in strict formation in front of the company's headquarters, receiving final orders from the General.

It was about the tenth day of the strike. Our dead were buried. Sent on their final journey with honour, to the sounds of Beethoven's «Requiem». It was unheard of and unprecedented in the history of Vorkuta for a zek to be laid to rest with such honour. Surprisingly, the authorities allowed this. Yes, it was about the

tenth day of the strike. The State had not received half a million tons of coal. The quarters of the commandants were dirty from floor to ceiling. The time had come for order to be restored.

The general's crack troops set out from the garrison to carry out their battle orders. Maslyenyikov and his men crossed the Vorkuta River at the TEC-2 bridge and continued along the railway line towards Mine No. 29. We could see everything clearly. We followed their every movement.

Next, fire trucks drove out of the garrison and, after crossing the river, continued up the river bank near Mine No. 29.

«They will use water,» we reasoned, comforting ourselves with the most simple and most logical of all possible scenarios.

At about four o' clock, we heard the first shots ring out from that direction. These shots immediately turned into uninterrupted machine gun fire. Then, it seemed like one minute... ten... twenty... eternity.... At dusk the prisoners were driven out, into the tundra. The general's battalion had taken control of Mine No. 29. Sixty-six prisoners had been killed, five hundred injured. This constituted the general's victory.

Was it just a chance battle? Was it a result of unforeseen circumstances? No! It was a carefully planned operation. The prisoners had been assembled at the gate of the camp and then fired upon. The fire trucks had not been ordered there to douse the prisoners with water as we had reasoned, but to wash away their blood. Later, one of Vorkuta's streets was named after the general, in honour of his glorious action.

The situation was critical. We were cut off from the rest of the world. The authorities had even managed to sever our local information network. The effects of starvation were beginning to weaken us. Three hundred grams of bread a day – a pitifully small

amount. Somehow we had managed to get a little water. It slowly accumulated in the reservoirs of the pipes. True, it was muddy, but it was drinkable.

After the fall of Camp No. 29 and TEC-2, our camp – the Yachaga Labour Camp – was next in line. After long and heated debate we decided to surrender. They treated us less harshly. Perhaps because our commandos occupied the explosives depots.

The commander of all of the camps of Vorkuta, Derevyenko, paid us a visit to inform us that, upon our surrender, all of our demands would be met. He read a telegram, presumably from Moscow, saying that very soon a state commission would visit Vorkuta to examine our grievances. We were reminded of the slogan above the gates of the camp «The Road to Freedom and Happiness is Honest Work for the Good of the Motherland», and we were told that no-one would be punished for participating in the strike.

We agreed. There was no other option if we wanted to stay alive. We were extremely emaciated due to starvation and knew what fate awaited us. Of course, we did not believe their other promises.

And so the strike at Vorkuta ended. We had achieved a great deal, but we had also achieved very little. The strike had proved that prisoners were able to unite. It had also shown that, after Stalin's death, the Soviet system had not changed one bit with regard to its respect for human rights. We were now convinced that Stalin alone was not solely to blame for our misery. The whole system was at fault, its inhuman structure and rules upheld by the millions of Party members who created it and were prepared to commit any crime to defend it.

As expected, the authorities did not keep their word. Once control over the camps had been regained, repressions began

immediately. The prisoners who had been most active in the strike were arrested and locked up in a hastily established hard labour camp (No. 66). From there they were sent to Irkutsk prison. Many were shot along the way, the rest sentenced to a year at Vladimir Prison. Intensive interrogation and regrouping took place at the camps. Those who took part in Vorkuta's first strike were tried in the autumn of 1956, but the interrogations continued well into the eighties.

Yes. That all happened in Vorkuta. In the unusually warm summer sunshine of 1953.

THROUGH THE EYES OF A CHILD

Laima Stradiņa

Whenever I think of those March days, I feel an overwhelming sense of loss and sadness for my beloved parents, our ruined family home «Bulduri» and our shattered lives. Yet I consider it my duty to testify to these events, if only to preserve the memory of my parents and other Latvian farmers. Admittedly on 25 March, 1949¹, our family was spared deportation to distant Siberia, nevertheless we lost everything that several generations had laboriously and lovingly established, built and developed, with the result that my parents spent their twilight years in a humble dwelling far from their place of birth.

There had been talk of deportation since autumn. The adults had grown markedly gloomy in the couple of weeks before 25 March, and although I, a mere eleven-year-old child, was not told anything, I was aware of a certain tension in the air and whispered conversations.

For quite a few weeks my father had been staying with relatives in Rīga, for someone must have warned him. He came back to our homestead on the last weekend before the deportation, but

¹ 25 March, 1949 – The largest mass deportation on any one day of Latvians to Siberia took place on this day. The Soviet regime deported 43,231 people.

didn't sleep indoors. My parents didn't really believe that they would be deported, because Father wasn't regarded as a kulak and had never participated in any organized activities either during Latvia's independence or the German occupation. He had always paid his taxes on time and done his share of work for the country. The communist regime had already seen to it that 10-hectare plots of land were taken from our 80-hectare property and given to new settlers², leaving us with 30 hectares. But apparently the chairman of the local council had been exceedingly diligent when making up the lists of those to be deported.

That Monday morning, as usual, I was taken to the Ropaži school for the week. The school was 11 kilometres from our home. Even though my parents knew about the atrocities perpetrated by the Russian army, it simply did not occur to them that a child could be arrested and deported without its parents.

A few days later, rumour was going around that all vehicles in the district had been requisitioned. The boarding school children could only guess at the reasons. Though feeling uneasy, we went to bed.

Around midnight a loud rumble woke us. The schoolyard was full of trucks. We switched on the light and everyone got up. An officer came in, told us to turn off the light and go back to bed, everything would be alright. The teacher, too, screamed at us to turn off the light. There were forty of us in the dormitory. Gradually we calmed down, got back into bed in the darkness and fell asleep.

Everyone was woken up at about three o'clock in the morning. We all sat up in our beds. It was obvious that our teacher found it

² *New settlers* – Most of these were Russians brought to Latvia as part of the russification policy and to fill the homes vacated by the deportees.

very hard to walk around the boarding school, waking the children who were to be deported, but with fully armed soldiers beside her she had no choice. And so she walked past the beds of her young charges and stopped at those singled out. Like everyone else, I was hoping that they wouldn't stop at mine, but it was not to be.

The rest was like a nightmare – getting dressed and being helped to pack my things. I think there were at least twenty-five of us. The school cook made us some hot cocoa. Later she was apparently sacked for that. We said good-bye to each other, and that was heart-breaking. Then we were lined up in pairs and marched to the deportation centre. Soldiers with bayonets fixed walked in front as well as behind us.

On a table at the centre was a big map with all the homes in the county. From the corner of my eye I saw that our home was circled in red, but I didn't know what that meant (I found out later that they had gone there, but none of those listed for deportation had been at home.) I felt as if everything around me was collapsing, but I couldn't cry. Even today I hardly ever shed tears.

The children were put up in a small red brick building housing the Cheka area headquarters. It was located at a crossroads in the centre of Ropaži. We were taken inside and told to sit down on a bench. There were two rooms, where all the vehicles and deportees from the county were registered. The district Party organiser was also here. As soon as a truck arrived, we all went outside to see whose family had been brought here. And so quite soon many children left as they were taken away with the family.

By lunchtime only a few of us remained. I almost went with some relatives because they said my mother had been taken away that morning and I would see her at the Ropaži railway station. I remember I clambered into the truck, sat down on a bag of flour

and was sitting there holding a clock, when the organiser saw me and ordered me to get off, saying I was not to go with strangers. When the next truck arrived, we were not allowed to go outside any more. Perhaps that was for the best, for in that one the women were crying and the children, especially the little ones, were screaming. I recall that in one truck there was a child about 1½ years, another just a few months old, but their mother was having trouble with her heart. As arrested persons we were not permitted to go to the pharmacy, but I think someone did bring her some medicine.

To my child's mind it seemed as if the world was coming to an end or something horrible and irreversible was taking place, for those trucks just kept coming. I was asked where my parents were. I answered that they were in Rīga and that was all I knew. I honestly didn't know where they were. And so that evening, sitting all alone in my coat among the Chekists, I envied the children who had gone, because the most important thing to me at that moment was being with my mother. While I was there, a driver who had refused to take part in the deportation was brought in. As punishment his family was fetched and they were all deported.

Radio sets and other belongings were piled into one of the rooms. I was allowed to sleep in a corner on the muddy floor. I spread out my mother's shawl and fell asleep, but during the night the shawl was pulled out. Someone needed it to wrap a radio, most of which had already vanished. And so I spent several days in this room, watching people being taken away and their belongings stolen. The tragedy of Ropaži was taking place right before my eyes. I don't recall eating anything during this time, and anyway food was not on my mind. A soldier with a rifle accompanied me even to the toilet.

Then a distant relative came to claim me. She gave a written guarantee that she would take responsibility for me. I was among

people again. I could hardly eat anything. A week later a friend of my father, Augusts Šleicers, arrived to take me to see Father, so he said. I jumped at the offer. Unfortunately Šleicers liked his drink and our «search for Dad» dragged out as he took me from one county to another. I didn't see my father until autumn, for he hid in the forest all summer. However, I was reunited with Mother a couple of weeks later.

Being the only one at home that fateful night, Mother had had a terrible time. The dog had barked furiously at about one or two o'clock, she had got up and in her nightdress gone into the landing. She heard someone knocking on Kapickis' (one of the new settlers) window and speaking Russian. This Kapickis had lately been looking very self-important, and because my parents suspected him of watching them, they were afraid of him. The fact that he hadn't been greeting them in the last few weeks also seemed significant. And so Mother, barefoot, ran upstairs to ask Ziediņš, the pleasant new settler, to move the large wardrobe so that she could hide in the space under the roof, as had previously been arranged. The Chekists came into the room on the ground floor and noticed that a person had been sleeping in the bed. They searched the sheds, stables and barns, and prodded everything with their bayonets. The house was searched too, of course, but it didn't occur to them to look in the fourth space under the roof. Despite searching and waiting for a week, they did not find her.

When the Chekists had gone, the Ziediņš family let Mother out and gave her some clothes. She went to another homestead, where she stayed in a barn for a few cold March days. Then she walked many kilometres to a railway station and, muffled up to look like a woodchopper and carrying a long saw in a coil, she

caught a train to her relatives in Rīga. When the passengers' documents were being checked, she pretended to be asleep.

My mother entered that space under the roof with dark hair but came out with grey. She later said that those had been the most awful days of her life. Of course if she had known that I was arrested, she would have come out of hiding and we would have ended up in Siberia, but luckily she didn't think of that.

We didn't know what was going to happen to us. Father was a fugitive, we had been evicted from our home and all our property was confiscated. However, we were not blatantly persecuted, nor were we sent to Siberia. I resumed going to the Ropaži school, but lost my position as class captain. In other respects I was treated well, although regarded as someone who had returned from the dead.

In autumn my father somehow managed to be officially registered in another county and find a job as farm labourer. He didn't return to Ropaži until five years later, and that only for the traditional commemorative service at the cemetery.

Gradually my parents established a small farm elsewhere, even helped their children, yet they never forgot «Bulduri». Life went on after 1949, they worked, they laughed, but they were no longer the same people. Something within had been extinguished and lost for ever. I never again saw them the way they had been in «Bulduri». Was it perhaps the landscape, the air, the lake, the land tilled by their forefathers, that had given them a different poise and perspective on life?

After 1993, when archives were opened,³ we saw our names on the list of the people to be deported, and also received a

³ *When archives were opened* – Some time into independence, the Latvian Saeima (Parliament) decreed that the hitherto secret files of the former Soviet regime, insofar as they were available, were to be opened.

Through the Eyes of a Child

description of the property confiscated. «Bulduri» had been thoroughly plundered – the official inventory listed 7 small earthenware bowls, 4 secondhand forks, 7 earthenware cups, 2 soup spoons, 16 plates, 2 tons of second-grade potatoes, 70 bottles, 8 bags and other small items. When I read that, I cried with embarrassment and humiliation.

Nowadays my family and I visit the Ropaži graveyard, where my beloved parents, brother and sister, and all my paternal and maternal relatives are buried. As I tidy the graves, I sometimes try to imagine what our lives would have been like if history had not dealt so harshly with Latvia.

I would like to dedicate this account to all the children who were sitting with me in that small red building in Ropaži that March night.

23 March, 1996

description of the new... (faded text)

Now... (faded text)

... (faded text)

... (faded text)

... (faded text)

EXCERPTS FROM
«SUNSET ON THE YENISEY RIVER»¹

Auseklis Helvigs

THE ELECTION

Red yet begrudging its warmth, the sun sank slowly behind the taiga trees. The village of Lebedyev hid itself in a cold, foggy mantle. The cold set in, fierce and long-lasting.

The horses returned from work covered with frost, icicles hanging from their noses. The workers carting firewood, water and hay hurried to unharness them so that they themselves could seek some warmth indoors.

Soon the harnesses were hung up on hooks in the stablemen's hut. A fire was burning in the tin stove, the tack was drying and there was a strong smell of stable in the small room. I was used to this smell. I threw a few blocks of wet birchwood into the stove and hurried to the stable. The horses were eating their hay quickly as if someone was ready to take it away from them. I liked listening to them eating and snorting now and then. The old ones occasionally stamped their exhausted legs, or rubbed their matted sides against the stall.

¹ *The Yenisey River* is one of the great Siberian waterways. It is navigable during the ice-free period lasting less than six months.

It was already dark. I could now run home to have some turnip soup for dinner. There was a profusion of stars in the sky. It was getting colder. Snow was crunching loudly underfoot. Sound carries well in sub-zero temperatures – somewhere at the other end of the village a door squeaked and a woman was cursing in a high-pitched voice. You could hear the whimper of a dog in pain – someone had probably given its ribs a massage with a lump of wood, or had shown it where to go with a kick. Dogs had a hard time, especially in winter. Rarely did their owners feed them properly. Emaciated and weak, they wandered around in the village and ate whatever people left behind around the corner, for there were no toilets. Yet they did useful work – harnessed, they pulled boats and sleds with firewood in winter, and helped their owners track animals.

I entered my hut enveloped in a white cloud of cold. When it dissipated, I saw four ageing belles, each sitting in a corner of the warm room, and near the stove on a log the agitator, the village teacher. Elections were near, and that evening a talk was to be given about the technique of voting. Big deal, I thought, all you had to do was put your ballot paper into a box.

«Well, Helyves², are you ready to vote for candidate Agrafyona Kirilovna for deputy?»

I replied that I did not wish to vote for Agrafyona, the senior fisherwoman, who made fun of the Latvian girls working on the nets, took their blankets and never returned them. She decorated the walls of her room with these hand-woven blankets. She sat in the boat wearing shoes while the girls, walking barefoot on the gravelly bank, had to pull it.

² *Helyves* – The local people found it difficult to pronounce the author's name.

That evening in our hut the teacher didn't say another word. She got up quickly, arranged the big shawl on her head, buttoned her coat and left.

«You shouldn't have said that,» a voice came from one corner.

«What's going to happen now, son?» That was my mother's voice from another corner.

I had no idea what was coming up. I slurped down my turnip soup and went to the stable to repair the horse equipment for the next day. The shack was lit by a home-made wick-light that flickered and smoked. Now and then the corners of the building cracked. That was the work of Jack Frost. The fire in the stove was burning. It was warm inside. I felt sleepy and lay down on the bunk.



A wick-light.

The footsteps of someone coming in and a veritable cascade of swearwords woke me from my snooze. I got the light burning again. Durya Pavlovna, who was the kolkhoz office cleaner and courier rolled into one, had come. Having stumbled over some equipment in the dark, Pavlovna was trying to regain her vertical stance. Without interrupting her cursing, she first of all lifted her bottom hidden in padded trousers, then finally was upright again.

«What's eating you at this hour of the night, Pavlovna?»

«The uncle who came from the regional office wants to see you.»

«What, now? It's late, I'll go in the morning.»

«No, no, he says you have to come straightaway.»

Well, if the uncle wants to see me, he wants to see me. The local people called anyone «uncle» who arrived from the regional

centre, or any old vagrant who happened to find his way to our village. I put on my padded jacket. What time could it be? Judging by the position of the Big Bear, it was probably around midnight.



A sleeveless padded jacket.

When I entered the office, the uncle was sitting alone at the chairman's desk, which was covered with an old placard torn here and there. The surface was spotted with tiny holes burnt out with mahorka³ cigarettes. On this table covering was also an interesting pattern of purple ink blots, proof that people using this table could write. A kerosene lamp was burning on the table. Only the school and the small shop had such lamps. Beside it was a pistol in its holster. The stove had long since gone out so the uncle had a sheepskin coat draped over his shoulders. He was the regional appointee for the coming elections. I couldn't make out his face because the small office was full of blue cigarette smoke.

«Greetings,» I said.

«Ah, the agitator's here. Good, good.»

I said I wasn't an agitator and at present was working with horses.

«I know, I know. I'm told you don't want to vote for Agrafyona Kirilovna. Don't you like her?»

I replied that I will be happy to vote for other candidates.

³ *Mahorka* (*Nicotiana rusticana*) is a coarse tobacco grown mainly in the Ukraine.

«So that's the situation. You... Vatsuklyst Andornovich⁴... Tell you what. You can agitate the trees and animals in the taiga. Get ready to go hunting in the taiga. The state needs pelts, they're our soft gold. Don't forget to hand in your bread ration cards at the office tomorrow. You'll now be able to eat as much as you like – you'll get money for the pelts.»

«But I haven't got a gun or suitable footwear,» I tried to protest.

«I hear a cow has died in the kolkhoz shed. I'll tell them tomorrow to cut you a piece of the hide. You'll be able to make yourself some fine footwear. You have no gun, you say? Well you're not getting one. We can't give a gun to the likes of you. You'll just have to set snares and traps. Is that clear? You can go now and start getting ready.»

The appointee hawked and spat heartily, threw the cigarette butt on the floor and rubbed it out carefully with his foot clad in a deerskin boot. Bending down slightly he looked down as if to see if the black mark went well with the clean-scrubbed floor. I assumed that the conversation was over.

The verdict had been read and there was no appeal.

I didn't go back to my shack because I didn't want to have to tell Mother, she'd find out soon enough. I went back to the stable and lit the wick-light hanging on a nail. The horses were neighing softly, they had finished the hay. I gave them some water and put fresh hay in the feed rack and the sound of horses' teeth champing could be heard again. The walls and ceiling were covered with a thick layer of hoarfrost and the horse manure was frozen and clattered like walnuts.

I lay down on the hunk but couldn't sleep. I thought about the taiga. What will it be like? A gun would come in handy, I'd be

⁴ See note 2.

able to get a bird or two. But I was told I wouldn't get one. A few villages further north a deported Greek had in desperation shot at the kolkhoz supervisor as the latter was crouching to relieve himself. He had hit the hat, the supervisor's head remained intact. Since then deportees were not trusted with weapons.

By morning the whole village knew that «Vatsuklyst» was being sent to hunt in the taiga. Some people were grinning, others looked at me pityingly. A few consoled me, saying that others had survived and I would, too.

I started getting ready. First I had to fix myself some footwear. Till now I'd been wearing something Mother had made from some rags. There was no name for this hybrid brand. They could pass for high galoshes or even slippers fit for a king. I could've bet there was no other pair like that not only in our village, but also in the whole world. Mine, what's more, were saturated with horse urine. Despite my attempts to dry them out by the stove in the stable the smell remained. The aroma of the stable, however, gave me a certain advantage. When I entered the village shop to get my daily bread ration, I didn't have to queue up. The shop assistant couldn't bear this smell I was accustomed to. The minute she noticed me she would weigh the bread and I was out of the shop in a jiffy. Maria Yermolayevna was a kind person and understood the deportees' situation.

I had to find Zakhar Pavlovich, for it was he who had skinned the cow and only he knew where the hide was put. Zakhar had not been conscripted because he couldn't bend the index finger of his right hand. This deformity had been acquired as a result of excessive curiosity or self-education on Zakhar's part. The work brigade he had been fishing with on the Yenisey River had once arrived in Igarka where they decided to visit a sawmill. The

natives of Lebedyev saw a log-frame and a circular saw for the first time in their lives. Zakhar had touched the saw with his finger. None of his workmates had tried to stop him but instead stood with their mouths open waiting to see what would happen. Luckily a timber worker had yelled a warning. Zakhar still had a finger, albeit a crippled one. He was nicknamed «Straightfinger».

I found him at home drinking tea. Wearing a padded jacket, he was sitting at the head of the table in a corner of the room under an icon. An old-fashioned samovar, a tea glass and a tiny piece of sugar were on the table. I told him why I had come, adding that the appointee himself had sent me.

«So you say you need some hide. Sit down, have some tea. Then we'll go.»

I didn't want any tea. All that turnip soup was sloshing around in my stomach. I was amazed to see Zakhar drinking one glass of tea after another without sugar. Having finished drinking, puffing and wheezing, his face as red as if he had come out of the bathhouse, he crossed himself with his straight finger, pulled out a rag from among the bedclothes and wiped his face and bald head. A leather belt with a knife in a sheath made from birch tree bark was hanging near the doorpost. Zakhar was now ready to go and get the hide.

The frozen cowhide was hanging from a rafter in the cowshed. Zakhar Straightfinger pulled out his knife, tested its sharpness with his rough left hand index finger, then, the tip of his tongue sticking, out began cutting. The fellow found it hard to hold the handle because of his stiff finger. He had once accidentally slit a kolkhoz horse's throat as he was trimming its mane. The wound had healed. I was worried he would spoil the hide meant for my boots, but the task was successfully accomplished. He agreed to give me a piece to make extra soles as well.

From this raw hide I made a pair of boots like the ones traditionally worn in the north. I borrowed a pattern for the top and sole. The sole has fur on the outside whereas the top has it on the inside. The top of the boot I made from an old sack. The boots are tied below the knees with laces to prevent snow getting in. These boots are light and warm if you have something to wrap around your feet. However, there is a drawback – you have to keep them away from the constantly hungry dogs. You can't dry them either, because then they shrink and in warm conditions smell of dead animal. Still, they are versatile and you can wear them on either foot. So my boots, made with the help of a home-made needle, were ready that evening. I was grateful to the dear departed cow, that at such a propitious moment she had gone on to the distant pastures from which there is no returning.

A vital piece of equipment for a hunter is a type of sled. It is a lightweight construction with thin runners held together by cords. A home-made one could take a load of about 200 kilograms. I already had some sleds and had till then been using them to cart firewood.

There was still the problem of food. I had the bright idea of stealing a bag of turnips from the cowshed. This root vegetable was not nutritious, but by forming bulk in your stomach, gave you the feeling of having eaten. My mother cleaned and boiled them up in a couple of litres of skim milk. We froze the product in round slabs which I piled into my sled on the day I left. I received four small square loaves of bread as advance payment for the pelts I would get. In one corner of the sled I packed my dinner set: three different-sized empty tins, admittedly a little rusty. I also put in a pair of wide hunter's skis. Second-hand but still in good condition, they had been given to me by Valdis Zirups.

The day for my departure arrived. A new day was dawning. A cold north-easterly was blowing and a chill fog hung over the Yenisey. The only thermometer in the village read -48°C . The way across the river was well-travelled, so I didn't need my skis.

I looked back at the village. It reminded me of a ship with dozens of chimneys. In the cold air white smoke was rising from all of them. It looked beautiful against the reddish horizon. I clambered up the opposite bank of the Yenisey with my sleds, walked through the stretch of willows and arrived in the taiga. Here I was sheltered from the biting wind. The fir frees, some with heads bent with the weight of snow, welcomed me solemnly. The tallest, as befits leaders, were bathed in the golden glow of the rising sun. It was as silent as in a church before a service. There were still bluish shadows on the pristine snow under branches. It seemed disrespectful to disturb the silence of this beautiful, harsh landscape. It was almost improper to leave foot-prints. You felt you had to dress formally to deserve the honour of coming here.

Well, I had done my best. I was wearing my new boots. One of them had white fur, the other had brown, for such had been the poor cow's hide. My trousers were grand too – they were embellished with multicoloured patches, the only original material being that around the waist. On my back I had a hand-me-down padded jacket, and a beanie knitted by Milda Vilsone back home kept my head warm. The old men in the village had laughed, saying that I could be sure no bear was going to come near me. A year later I did come face to face with one, but it just snorted and shook its head as if to say, «You're not plump enough to eat yet, kid.»

After the snowstorm the tracks to the hunters' hut were covered by thick snow. I followed the signs hacked on the tree trunks and

arrived at the hut towards evening. Acquaintances of mine were already there – Valdis Zīrups and Timofey Kuzmin. The latter's wife was the village baker. Our meeting was a happy one and Timofey laughed about my arriving in the taiga without a weapon. He immediately promised to give me one of his guns and some cartridges.

Timofey lived like the native he was. He fed his dogs bread and flour. As was customary, hunters kept their food in the snow on the hut roof, so I threw my bread loaves and frozen slabs of turnip there, too. Timofey guessed by the sound that there was frozen milk. He was sick of eating game, so he decided to cook some gruel with milk. I was sent to fetch firewood. I found a small, dry cedar tree, which I chopped down and dragged back to the hut. Meanwhile Timofey had been working hard. To get water, he had melted some snow, put my slab of turnips into a pot and had added his groats. When the soup was boiling, he had stirred and tasted it, and realised that my slab did not contain any milk. As I was approaching the hut with the firewood, I could hear Timofey swearing. While I was taking off my skis, Timofey kicked the door open, carried out the pot of soup and without a glance at me, emptied it into the dogs' trough. Valdis was sitting on his bunk and laughing his head off. I couldn't understand what was going on. Timofey didn't say anything. Then, lying on his bunk and looking at the ceiling, he began, «I treated you as an equal and gave you a gun, even cartridges, but you...»

So that's it, I thought, he's already telling me off. I said, «I don't need a gun without cartridges. I don't I have to stand in a guard of honour.»

«Shut up!» Timofey shouted. «I would've shown you how to make a trap to catch hares, how to make snares, given you things,

but you go and spoil my gruel. Tell me, what is that shit you have brought with you? All the way from the village on sleds! Look, the soup has cooled down, but the dogs aren't eating it, they're going nowhere near the trough.»

I understood then. Dogs that have had their fill do not eat turnips. We settled our argument and peace reigned once more.

With an axe I chopped off a piece of bread from the frozen loaf and washed it down with some hot water. Then we piled some firewood in a corner to heat the hut during the night. The one who felt cold first was supposed to stoke the fire. I was sure to get this job because my bunk was closest to the door. Their noses in their fur, Timofey's dogs were curled up asleep on the floor around the stove. Actually it was not a floor in the usual sense of the word. It was an earthen one covered with woodchips, bird feathers, half-chewed bones and other rubbish that had been accumulating for years. Timofey forbade any tidying up, burning or throwing out. He said that everything on the floor made the hut warm and cosy.

The night was bitterly cold. The corners of the hut and at times even the trees in the taiga cracked. Winter nights in Siberia are long. Several times during the night we got up and smoked mahorka rolled in newspaper. We didn't speak. We looked at the hot sides of the tin stove and listened to the flames roaring. The hut warmed up. The dogs moved away from the stove and crawled under the bunks.

Timofey was the first to announce the morning as he came in buttoning his trousers. When it grew lighter we ventured out, put on our skis and went our separate ways. I had Timofey's gun over my shoulder, an axe tucked in the back of the belt and my home-made knife in its sheath in front.

After skiing for quite a while, I saw a squirrel in a birch tree. I loaded my gun with bated breath, aimed and fired. I stuck the result of my first successful shot under my belt with the light-coloured underbelly facing forward as I had seen local hunters do.

A little later I noticed some partridge. Lucky that Timofey had given me a gun. I aimed again, pulled the «trigger», but nothing happened. Frustrated I looked at my «gun» and was surprised to see that the bolt was no longer on the thread it had been tied to. The partridge were calmly flitting from one tree to another. I tried to warm my freezing hands by rubbing them. Then I remembered a nail I had noticed before inside the jacket lining. I forgot about my icy hands, cut a bit of the lining and took out the three-inch nail. Now I had to shorten it. I succeeded in breaking it in the right place by holding it firm against a tree trunk, turning it and making notches with a corner of the axe. The gun worked again, and I shot a bird.

As I was skiing back, I noticed a lot of hare tracks. On a «highway» such as this it would have been a good idea to put down my first snare made from green birchwood. Unfortunately my axe wasn't suitable for chopping a frozen birch tree, the blade bent and curled up like a wood shaving.

The short day was drawing to a close. I had two shells left, my axe was useless, so I decided to go back to the shack in the hope that Timofey would lend me one of his. I must have gone quite far and couldn't find the main path. I began to ski faster. It crossed my mind that I had lost my way. The sun's rays disappeared behind treetops, it was getting dark. I reached a small hollow with a fallen spruce. Its huge stump and roots ensured firewood for the whole night. I decided to stay here.

Using a ski, I cleared the snow around the stump and made a pile of dry branches. I collected some green branches and stuck

them in the snow for shelter. Some I heaped up to sleep on. The stump was burning brightly, throwing showers of sparks up into the sky. My mattress of needles was soon dry and I sat down. My legs were tired, the warmth from the fire was caressing my face and hands. An unwelcome drowsiness was creeping up on me. We often wish we could fall asleep, but that time I fought sleep. I had to stay awake and keep the fire going if I was to survive.

Up till then I hadn't thought about dying. I was nineteen but had already helped dig quite a few pits and lay the dead in them. What was in store for me? Would the Grim Reaper approach from the dense thicket slowly, or would he pounce on me? He is often depicted carrying a scythe. It would be hard to walk around trees with a tool like that. Now, a field or a meadow was a different story, you could flail about to your heart's content. How would he get here? Maybe on skis, considering that the snow was waist-high. Or perhaps he would trudge through it, rattling and breaking branches as he went.

I crouched on my knees. It was comfortable until I fell asleep, fell over and woke up. To pass the time I walked around the fire and admired the mighty stump. It was perishing to save me. When I started feeling hungry. I plucked the partridge and cooked it on a skewer. I had no bread, but the meal, although without salt, tasted delicious. Gradually the moon, a large bright disc, appeared above the treetops in all its glory. I tried to make out a misty ring around it which would forecast a snowstorm and warmer weather, but in vain. The night was clear, the sky dark blue and starry.

I remembered that as a boy of five or six I had often sleepwalked when the moon was full. Many a time my father had found me in the yard, carried me back inside and drawn the

curtains so that the moonlight wouldn't shine on my face. Who would rescue me now? It was three years since we had parted. There was no news of him, nor of Grandfather, whom we left behind in Ostashkov. He was having a stomach operation on the day of his arrest in Jelgava. A couple of hours after the operation he was carried into the cattle wagon. Two clamps held the incision. By the time we crossed the Latvian border, Grandfather was already unconscious. The train halted in Ostashkov. Mother called for help. «First aid» appeared in the shape of a farmer's horse-drawn cart. The driver, barefoot and wearing trousers made from sacking, was sitting on a handful of straw, but Grandfather was laid on bare boards. Soldiers wearing hats with red stars pushed the wagon doors shut. We continued eastwards. Through the small barred window we saw Grandfather being taken away. His arm was hanging over the side of the cart and it looked as if our unconscious grandfather was waving good-bye.

A colossal cloud of sparks jolted me out of my reflections. The stump had collapsed and was burning even more intensely. Day was dawning. Shadows were turning bluish-green again. As soon as daybreak erased the night I took leave of my bonfire.

Around lunchtime I found the hunters' shack. Timofey's dogs, barking loudly and wagging their tails, were the first to greet me. There was smoke coming from the chimney. I was surprised that someone was home and not out hunting. Timofey himself came out of the shack.

«Where have you been? Where did you sleep? Valdis and me, we fired a few shots in the air. Thought maybe you couldn't find your way back.»

«You guessed right, I lost my way. But your shots were quiet, I didn't hear anything. Why aren't you out hunting today?»

«It's freezing cold. Squirrels stay in their nests in this weather. I might go into the village. I'll come back when it gets warmer.»

Well, I thought to myself, that's the way to do it – live in the taiga when you feel like hunting; if you're not in the mood, go home or just sit in the shack.

«Well, you see,» Timothy said, «you didn't come back last night, we thought you'd had an accident. Shot or frozen to death. So I sent Valdis to the village to tell them you've disappeared.»

Timofey had plenty of hot water in his pots. I decided to celebrate my return with a big hunk of frozen black bread and lots of hot water. But lo and behold, another miracle had happened – one of my loaves had disappeared. Timofey helped to explain this phenomenon.

«See,» he drawled, «I thought you were a goner and wouldn't need any bread. But now that you're alive I'll give you back the bread as soon as I come back. I wanted to feed the dogs so they pull the sleds better.»

The following evening Valdis returned from the village accompanied by the regional supervisor of hunting, who happened to be in the village. The chief seemed to be quite happy that they did not need to search for my earthly remains in the taiga. With gusto he plunged a hunting knife into a can of American pork and spread the meat thickly on some bread. Then he tossed the empty can under a bunk. I watched it anxiously, hoping that Timofey's dogs wouldn't come in and lick it clean. I reckoned there was still a good spoonful of fat left. Valdis probably had the same idea, for he had come back from the village without a skerrick of food. Well, we missed out on the tidbit because Timofey, you see, had decided that the can would be most useful for keeping percussion caps in. After removing the can from under the bunk with the aid

of a stick, he looked inside it by the light of a homemade candle. When he realised there was some nice fat there, he tried to take it out with his index finger but the sharp edge of the can cut it badly.

«Bloody Americans!» he yelled in pain and anger, and flung the can into a corner of the shack.

We were ready to call it a day and were lying on the bunks when the supervisor asked me, «What did you say about the elections that made the appointee so mad? When he heard about you being lost he said «Serve him right».»

At dawn the supervisor and Timofey went away. Wood chips and dog excrement were left lying around in the shack. The two members of the lowest caste in the village, Valdis and I, stayed. We owned nothing but our bare lives, rags and lice. A state of semi-starvation made us apathetic, helpless and at times even weepy.

It was three weeks till election day. We'd be allowed to return to the village for a couple of days to cast our votes for a brighter future. We melted the turnip mash because there was precious little bread left. Yet one day we had reason to celebrate. Valdis shot two partridges and I snared a white hare. We made a stock and slurped it. Shovelling it in made us feel chirpier. Life seemed more promising. We could even glimpse a semblance of a smile on each other's faces. After this exceptional meal we heated the stove till it glowed. Then we stripped off and held our tattered clothes over the stove. The lice couldn't stand the heat and in their hurry to escape, dropped on the stove. There were hundreds of them, each insect flaring like a spark and giving off the smell of a roast. Our activity reminded us of burning low quality sparklers.

«Just like Christmas,» I said.

«Sure is,» Valdis agreed.

Then we set to work ironing the seams of our clothes with a heated piece of wire. We killed a large number of nits this way. Next we heated up water in every container we could find and had a wash. There were no towels or soap, we dried ourselves near the stove and went to bed.

The end of February, but it was still very cold. In the clear air your breath would swish and turn to fine hoar-frost. The goddess of the hunt was not kind to us. I did get another hare, but a fox had visited the snare before me and left nothing but the paws. We got out the last rounds of turnip mash from the snow on the roof, and in the last few days before election day inspected the rubbish under the bunks. We found some hare intestines that Timofey had tossed away and his dogs hadn't eaten. After cutting and cleaning them, we fried them on top of the stove.

Finally the day arrived. We were allowed to go back to the village and vote for a glorious future, for the candidates on the Communist and Independent tickets. Valdis and I prepared for this day by getting busy with a home-made needle and some thick netting string, and stitching our shabby clothes.

Drained of energy, we skied back to the village slowly, dragging the empty sleds behind us. It was dark by the time we reached the steep bank of the Yenisey. One or two people enquired if the hunting had been successful. «I'm alive,» I replied. On seeing me the next morning, the regional appointee asked, «How many pelts did you bring back?» «One, mine,» I answered.

The villagers were preparing for election day as if it were an important festival. It seemed as if on that day something hitherto unknown was going to appear in the sky. Perhaps a messiah's voice would resound from the clouds. Everyone tried to contribute something special to put on the festive table. The multi-ethnic

«club» of deportees wasn't to be put to shame, either. When we noticed a big black patch on the snow near the kolkhoz potato cellar, we knew that damaged tubers had been thrown out. Everyone who could move hurried to the rotting heap and collected everything in bags and sacks.

On the morning of the election you had to get up early. At six o'clock the bells tied to the horsedrawn sleighs were already tinkling. The bony, shaggy creatures were driven along snow-bound roads to collect the ballot-papers from people too weak to attend. Several horses had been rested for two weeks so that they would be able to deliver news of the election process to the neighbouring village every two hours.

To decorate the voting centre, a sofa, a real museum piece, was brought from the school. When the rumble of the October Revolution had reached the northern banks of the Yenisey, the village proletariat had decided to appropriate this sofa, which belonged to a Russian Orthodox priest. They didn't help themselves to the silver cross or sacred vessels. The sofa, however, was brought to our village, bedbugs and all, and presented to the school in the name of the revolution. The historical piece of furniture was probably worthy of this honour – its springs were still capable of tossing a good-sized man in the air.

The villagers were starting to arrive, stamping the snow off their boots on the threshold inside the club room. It wasn't the custom to wipe your feet outside. Doing it inside, well, that was a different story – everyone could see what a well-mannered person you were, cleaning even snow off your boots. A fire was kept going in a stove made out of a huge steel drum. The snow melted and made a big puddle on the floor, but that didn't stop new arrivals from stamping their feet pompously.

The voting continued. The election committee had a lot to worry about. There was no telling how the deportees, over a hundred of them, would vote. To calm their nerves, the officials always had a burning cigarette, mahorka rolled in newspaper, between their lips. But Ilya, an old hunter, and Zahar Straightfinger unanimously agreed that nowadays things were easier for the committee. Before, in the early years of Soviet rule, it had been much harder. Ilya, for example, had had to kneel under the table in the booth so that he could watch through a hole in the tablecloth if anyone was picking up the pencil to cross out a candidate's name. On one occasion he'd had pins and needles in his knees. The padded trousers hadn't been much help. As he was shifting around to make himself more comfortable, he started to cough. A woman who had just entered the booth heard him, lifted the tablecloth and asked, «Ilya, what are you doing there?» Ilya had barely managed to murmur, «Looking for the pencil...» «Are you blind or what? Look, it's here on the table.»

The room was full of cigarette smoke. The chairwoman of the committee, a teacher, begged and threatened, but to no avail, no-one stopped smoking. The floor was in a worse state than before. It was wet all over. Maybe it was better that way – the smokers' spit and sputum were not so noticeable. This «carpet» was also decorated with crushed cigarette butts.

Towards evening the voting equipment was put on the small stage to make room for dancing in the so-called hall. Music was provided by a blind harmonica player, who was brought by his grandson.

It was getting late. Valdis and I left the community hall and made our way home past Ivan's bath-house. We saw a light in the window that was just a peephole really, a small piece of glass

inserted into some birch tree bark. Strange, we thought, bath day was yesterday. We wondered what was going on. We crept up to the window and saw an amazing sight. Until then we'd only heard stories about it. But now we saw hell! There were naked women and children in the bath-house, and among them dogs whining and howling. At that stage of our lives we weren't interested in women's bodies. We realized that a session of folk medicine was in progress. The «doctor-in-charge» was the aforementioned candidate for deputy (she was in fact voted in). Children suffering from rickets had been gathered here. The deputy was holding a steaming hot birch switch in one hand and an unfortunate dog by the scruff in the other. She was thrashing it mercilessly. Using the same switch, she flogged the children. The procedure was accompanied by crying, yelling, the dogs' howling and the «doctor's» uninterrupted cursing. These traditional healers also considered it necessary to improve the shape of a newborn baby's head. They would squeeze it the day the baby was born while the bones are soft. Later the «sculptor» would point out someone and brag about moulding his or her head into a better shape. Some heads reminded you of a pear, others of a pumpkin. And of course the healers gave advice on all kinds of problems. The younger generation didn't follow the old traditions much, but the older ones stuck to them.

We ended election day with a meal around a tin stove. We fried the rotten potatoes. You couldn't wash them properly because they disintegrated. At that time there were twelve families living in one room in a big cabin that had once been a cooper's workshop. Quite a few roofing boards had been ripped off to make coffins. There was always a demand for one as the lack of vitamins and insufficient food took their toll.

Excerpts from «Sunset on the Yenisey River»

That evening the families took turns at the stove. One member from each family, the «pastry cook», cooked the potatoes, each of which had a different taste and quality. One of the women treated us to a salty mush that went well with the fried rotten stuff. The mush was obtained by evaporating the brine that was poured down the river bank from the fish processing factory. Sometimes you could get the brine for free, at other times you had to pay for it. By boiling it for a long time, you ended up with a mixture the colour of cocoa and the taste of fish. After eating it, you were able to drink up to four litres of boiled water and feel satiated. Using food substitutes such as this resulted in relatively harmless diarrhoea, until the time when a few more boards had to be removed from the roof.

The mothers had prepared a surprise – there was tea made from bilberry leaves and pancakes made from flour. They had come by the flour when the village shopkeeper had asked them to wash some flour bags that had got wet. They scraped off the dry dough, soaked it in water and fried the resulting mixture on top of the stove. We weren't choosy and ate the pancakes lint and all.

HUNGER

It was March, but the snow was still piled as high as your waist. One day I was given a new job – to graze cows! The kolkhoz workers had apparently announced that they had run out of hay. My helper in this bizarre duty was Anna, a Finnish woman. So we trampled down the snow to make a path, so that the emaciated cows could reach some aspen trees. We chopped and sawed the trees indiscriminately to feed the hungry animals, which champed greedily on the frozen buds, twigs and bark. It was no substitute

for fodder. The cows protested softly, lay down in the snow and refused to get up. The milkmaids helped us lift them onto sleds and drag them back to the village. The horses were too weak for this work. Our herd decreased with each passing day. Every morning all the farm workers accompanied us to the «pasture» to prop up any animal that fell by the wayside.

One day we lost a cow in a snowstorm. The following day everyone who had boots joined the search party. We found the cow, snowed in and her horn caught on a root. The snow had saved the creature from freezing to death. For two days the dairy workers kept it warm by lighting a bonfire, but on the third day it was skinned. A meeting of committee members was called and it was decided that Anna and I had to pay the kolkhoz 5000 roubles for the cow. We were allowed to keep the hide, head and meat. But an unknown villain cut out the tender bits of meat, and the kolkhoz store scales showed just 36 kilograms. Anna suggested we salt the meat and, in order to repay at least a part of the debt, sell it to the ships passing by in spring. My idea was to divide the meat between us and eat it so that there was some possibility of surviving. In the end we divided the meat and sold the hide to the village supervisor for 100 roubles.

That spring, despite efforts to save them, sixty-two head of cattle were lost. The cattle, barely alive, could not be herded anywhere. So people who had boots walked across the crusty snow on the Yenisey in the mornings to cut willows. The barefooted ones had the job of scraping off the bark, which was fairly decent fodder. Any cattle that died were skinned, salted and stored in the cellar, to be sold on passing ships when river navigation reopened.

Winter stubbornly persisted. A howling blizzard once caught the mail caravan off-guard. At that time deliveries of newspapers

and raw hide were made in horse-drawn sleighs. Late one evening one of the drivers, all covered with snow, came into our dwelling and told us that a horse had dropped dead not far from the village, and it would be worth the risk to get some meat in the darkness. Every boot owner armed himself with a knife or axe and set off. But by the time we got there, only the part the horse had been carrying on its underbelly was left.

Spring arrived again. The snow no longer formed a crust overnight. When it fell, it was grainy and heavy. Hunters returned from the taiga. The snow on the sunny side of roofs melted, and dark heaps of cow dung became visible on the Yenisey ice. The more the snow melted, the more dung and all kinds of garbage were revealed. There was nothing edible to retrieve, though, for the weakest dogs and people, the most thorough inspectors, had been busy. From the day the kolkhoz was established, all stable manure was dumped on the river slopes. Spring floods, the most efficient cleaners, took some of it away. The rest rotted and changed into a valuable fertiliser waiting to be discovered. In spring this good stuff turned the river water the colour of coffee, yet everyone still drew it, carried it up the embankment and used it in cooking. There was no alternative.

One morning the Yenisey was working to capacity, loading mountains of ice onto its banks and breaking it up in the middle of the current. The vast expanse of ice rumbled and roared, making a human being feel insignificant in the face of it. When the ice was gone, the river was in flood. The rushing waters were carrying thousands of logs, building materials, boats and even small wooden structures towards the Arctic Circle. However, people in all the villages along the river managed to salvage some of this valuable stuff for firewood.

Soon afterwards the first ship came from Krasnoyarsk. The villagers waited for it eagerly. Who knows, it could bring an expected or unexpected relative, or even an important official, who would tell everyone they could go home to their own jobs. Enough of this eating grass in Lebedyev, he'd say, go home and cultivate your own fields. A boss like that could arrive, couldn't he? Even if it was someone like the one in the blue uniform and carrying a pistol who hustled our family into a cattle wagon.

A ship did come. You could see its low, wide body and black funnel in the distance. But it didn't come anywhere near the village bank. Our hopes faded as it disappeared around the river bend. Yet it was evidence that there was a civilisation out there, that the long winter had ended and all hope was not lost.

Spring is the time for sowing. Everyone who was still able to move grabbed a tool that could pass for a spade and started digging. This was the third spring that we were planting potatoes, or rather, whatever we had been able to find – potato peelings, shoots and, if you were lucky, tiny tubers. You looked after your own plot. Fences were erected from poles and stakes carried on your back from the taiga, because the kolkhoz cattle, roaming free, often destroyed everything.

We were neither shot nor hanged here, just called fascists, but with the full knowledge of the local authorities, a great deal was done to hinder our survival. A few days after our arrival in Lebedyev, the kolkhoz officials decided to charge us more for dairy produce, despite the fact that we were supposed to be their new workers. Our potatoes had only just started to bloom when one night the fences were wrecked. Two years in a row the cattle wiped out our harvest.

In summer, privately owned cows frequently didn't return home to be milked, but stayed in the taiga at night. Now and then

a bear would kill one. One day a woman called Irina came to see Mother.

«Granny Valya, do you know any magic words? My cow doesn't come home in the evenings. I'm frightened a bear will get her. If you could do something... I'd give you a drop or two of milk...»

Mother didn't know any magic words, but she did know that Irina was in the habit of hitting the poor cow across its bony back after milking it, and never gave it water when it came home.

So «Granny Valya» took a chance. She tied on her patched scarf and went with Irina. First she looked at the cow and then whispered some magic words into its ear. Sensing the presence of a stranger, the cow shook its head.

«You see,» Mother explained, «she says she won't stay in the taiga any more.»

Next, Mother told Irina not to hit the cow but to stroke it before and after milking, and to put water in the trough every evening. On three evenings Irina herself was to bring the cow home, and she was not to swear in the cow's presence, for that would drive away the good spirits.

On feeling such kindness, the cow started coming home, and Mother was called on to help in similar situations. For quite a while we gulped our nettle soup with milk added.

While waiting for our potato harvest, we ate a variety of grasses such as goose-foot, nettles and sorrel, as well as the roots of some wild plants. Before an unfamiliar plant was eaten, it was first tried by several venerable, older ladies.

The edible plants were gathered in spring and summer. Equipped with a wide range of knife-like tools, we would dig up the plants. The kolkhoz chief had forbidden this method of obtaining food, saying that the pastures were being damaged, but this ban

fell on deaf ears. On one occasion he rushed up to one woman as she was digging and kicked her repeatedly. When she regained consciousness, she struggled back to her shack and never really recovered. Her grave, too, is on the bank of the Lebedyanka River.

Then one spring it was my turn to fall ill and spend quite a long time lying on the top part of the Russian style oven. My mother had managed to rent a corner near the oven in a local woman's house. It was comfortable there. When the oven was lit, it was warm in the room, and we had a roof over our heads in a clean corner of the room. Because I was ill, I got the most comfortable spot. My body had gone on strike against life. I had become extremely round. My mother hung up some rags so that my appearance wouldn't frighten the landlady's daughters.

In the evenings the women from next door would gather in this one room and discuss the events in the kolkhoz. They knew how many animals or deportees had perished. The mail came a couple of times a month. The girls would read it aloud because the mothers were illiterate. Usually the letters were from the war front. Almost every local family had a relative who was at the front or had been killed. The curtain separating the oven top from the room had parted slightly. I could see the women listening attentively to the letters being read, now sighing, now wiping away tears with the corners of their scarves. At one stage the landlady, nodding towards me, said, «Our boy here, too, is just about gone... He's all swollen up.»

Her words aroused in me a loathing for my illness and a strong desire not to succumb to it. I won't die, I won't die! I really wanted to live. My mother and two younger brothers, although emaciated, hadn't reached my condition. But Father had died in a

prison camp in December 1941, and Grandmother had passed away near Krasnoyarsk in 1942.

When warmer weather set in, the landlady asked us to move out, saying that she didn't want to see a corpse, meaning me, in her home. She took pity on us and let us use the attic. A miracle happened there. Holes appeared on my right shin and fluid seeped out. I became bony and light again. I was able to walk and help Mother find food. It was hard to find edible plants near the village. Occasionally she weeded a villager's garden, and in return was allowed to pick some goose-foot and chick-weed.

The following winter, sausage produced in America was available in exchange for ration cards in the little village shop. It was delivered in a large cask with metal hoops. The label was in English. A deportee from Riga, who could read English, got the bright idea to convince the shop assistant that what the label said was: «To be issued only to deportees. Non-compliance will lead to prosecution.» The assistant became really frightened and stopped selling the sausage. The villagers kicked up a fuss. The village deputy couldn't get any sausage, either, so she declared that whoever failed to show respect towards a deputy was assumed to be against the Soviet government. Sale of the sausage was resumed after quite a while, when the manager of the food co-operative arrived.

The kolkhoz storehouse for unprocessed flax was located next to our hut. After the flax was pulled, it was stacked here without the bolls being scutched. It looked as if flax was grown here for fun, because neither the seeds nor the fibre were used. Our granies advised us to use the linseed in our diet. It was well known that in Latvia calves had been fattened up on linseed. And so we carried the flax to our hut at night. We dried it, scutched the bolls,

and put the stocks back neatly. Then we dried the linseed and pounded it. It was a valuable addition to any meal. The pounding was done with the help of a used piston from a tractor motor that one of the women had. This gadget made a certain rhythmic noise. If a villager arrived, we would throw a rag over the object to hide our misdeed. On one occasion our visitor was a brigade leader, who had heard the unusual sound.

«What are you doing so late at night? What's that noise?» Around that time the kolkhoz was getting ready for the annual audit meeting, at the end of which there was usually dancing, so we said we were learning to dance.

«Yes, dear, that's right,» chipped in one of the women who was already on the bunk, snuggled under her blanket. «It's the annual meeting soon. We're rehearsing.»

The brigade leader looked around, mystified. As she was going out, she mumbled, «They can barely make it to work, but now they've taken it into their heads to dance. Some artists...»

In spring nobody could comprehend how mice had been able to gnaw off all the bolls. But by then a lot of water had flowed under the bridge.

Spring, as always, brought with it bustle and activity. Smoke was rising on the banks of the Yenisey, where some men were building canoes. Others were building boats from boards. You could smell fresh timber and tar.

In one yard two beardless dwarfs were boiling some mice. One of them was dressed in what had once been a grey dress, the other was wearing a pair of pants with multicoloured patches. Both dwarves had serious expressions on their smudged faces, as was appropriate for the important task in hand. They were trying to start a fire in a hearth built with some rocks. Propped up on the

Excerpts from «Sunset on the Yenisey River»

rocks was a tin for boiling the mice in. Unlike other, hundred-year-old dwarves, these two were still very young – nine to ten years old. They also had names: Dzidra Kalēja and Gunārs Scille. Presumably they would grow beards later, considering that even at this age their faces were lined with worry.

Granny Matilde was hurrying down the river bank carrying a parcel. It contained fried dog. She didn't want to miss the boatmen who would deliver the snack to Mirnaya, where her grandson Jēkabs was attending school. He was a quiet, sensible boy. At school the local boys took the parcel off him. Jēkabs cried, but the boys, stuffing roast dog into their mouths, were laughing. The teacher came into the classroom and noticed Jēkabs crying.

«What's the matter?»

«The boys took my parcel...»

«What parcel? What was in it?»

«M...m...meat...»

«Jēkabs, what are you talking about? Where did you get meat?!»

«Grandma sent me some... a dog...»

The boys stopped chewing. Then they started spitting and swearing. Some were crying, one boy was vomiting, but Jēkabs smiled.

I WAS TWENTY-ONE

Aleksandrs Birznieks

At 3.20 a.m. on 14 June, 1941, my parents and I were arrested without a court order or the public prosecutor's authorisation. We were taken out on the street, loaded into a truck, driven to the Torņakalns station in Rīga and put on a long train of cattle wagons, one of many. At about 2 o'clock in the afternoon, the doors of the wagon opened and my father was called away. He said goodbye to us quickly and pressed into my mother's hand his gold pocket watch and silver cigarette case, on which, in gold letters, his friends had written their initials and the words «For you, it may come in handy!» In the winter of 1943, this proved to be true. 14 June, 1941 was the last time I saw Father as he got off the cattle wagon.

On the very first day in the wagon I made friends with the Andrēns family – father, mother and their son, a high school student about my age. They had settled themselves on the opposite bunks. I remember that I got up, made myself comfortable at Mr Andrēns' feet, rested my head against his knee and without further ado, turned to their son Juris and said something to this effect, «What do you think, pal? Looks like we're in hot water.»

After a rough, three-week journey, we were all offloaded in Kansk, Siberia, and out in an open area, gradually divided into groups. Within about three days everyone was allocated to a

kolkhoz. My mother and I were assigned to a kolkhoz named after Molotov in the Abana region. From Kansk we travelled quite a long time in a truck to Abana, the regional centre. We had to get off there and see the NKVD (People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs) official. In Russian the letters NKVD were jokingly said to mean «Don't know when I'll be home». It was explained to us that we had been deported for an indefinite period of time as socially dangerous elements of the state. We would have to live and work where ordered. The law forbade us to leave work or move to another place. We were not issued with passports, but instead were given sheets of paper with a lot of lines and columns that had to be stamped twice a month, if I remember correctly, to show that a person was actually living where he was told. That was at the beginning of July, 1941. I didn't get a passport until 1956, and that was one with restricted rights of movement.

From Abana we were sent to a village nearby. In our group there were a couple and their son with whom we have remained friends to this day; a professor's wife and her son and daughter, both language students; three women with children between the ages of 15 and 30; a woman of about 50 and one about 30; and a chemical engineer with his mother, who were Jews. I spent about a year in this village, a year which has left indelible memories, probably because of the stark contrast between the past and the present. I remember that on arriving we were told to stay in the yard of the kolkhoz administration building. Only very old or crippled village people must have remained at home that first evening. The rest crowded around us and with immense curiosity literally stared at us. No harm was meant, nor ridicule, just plain curiosity. They looked at us in silence, passing a remark now and then. We, the younger generation who were born during Latvia's

years of independence, didn't understand what they were saying, but the older ones among us, who had been educated in tsarist Russia, explained that these people were discussing whether we are Germans or Poles. That year a great deal had to be learnt, understood and above all, re-examined.

We were all put up in one of the houses that belonged to the kol-khoz. There were cracks in the walls, and we tried to repair what we could. There were two rooms, one large, the other much smaller.

We were assigned to work in the kolkhoz straightaway. The jobs I remember best are digging silage pits and splitting firewood for the tractors in the summer of 1941. There were other tasks also, but these have stayed in my memory. We were not paid, but days worked were registered. It was explained that at the end of the year, when the accounts were drawn up, we would be paid our share. But we needed money immediately because we were in fact without means. Each of us was thrown back on his or her own resources. So bartering began, in which belongings such as sheets from home, some footwear and especially clothes you could more or less do without were exchanged. The conditions under which you had been deported played an important role. Some people, who had been told what was in store, had packed as much as they could, but others, like our family, had not been given any information at all. But in spite of that, my mother had had the foresight to take a few things with her. It seems to me that the villagers benefited more, for they put very high prices on their products and gradually increased them. Some of our ladies naturally didn't like having to part with their one-time fashion masterpieces, but hunger forced them to. There was a demand for everything. Sheets, cloth, blouses, jackets, suits, all were sold at rock-bottom prices.

Mr Andrēns, a former prison guard in Jūrmala, wasn't exactly our group leader, but did keep us informed about everything and advised us. He kept in touch with the kolkhoz administrators, who assigned us to various jobs. Because he had a good command of Russian, he was able to enlighten the kolkhoz and village leaders on our unenviable situation regarding food. And so, towards the end of July we were regularly issued something from the kolkhoz – some flour, from which we learned to bake bread, and occasionally meat. It was horsemeat. It often happened that these animals broke a leg or got some other injury at work, and they were then simply slaughtered. We didn't get the lion's share, of course, just enough to keep the wolf from the door. It must be said, however, that the kolkhoz people were very poor.

The main thing in the prevailing circumstances was to understand and get used to things so that you could gain some control over your life. Passive acceptance would not stand you in good stead. You had to take action and do something if you were to survive. I realised that I had to learn Russian as soon as possible, become qualified in a more or less skilled job, and establish good relations with the local people.

I borrowed books from the library. My mother helped me a lot because she knew Russian, but it was important to practise. I had to speak Russian, which I did. What a mess I sometimes got into! I would mix up words and use incorrect grammar. Still, my perseverance paid off, for within a relatively short time I could express myself quite coherently and even figuratively. Admittedly the village maidens played a large part in this. I am by nature fairly impulsive and sociable so, despite the unfavourable living conditions, now and then I found time to pay attention to one or two young ladies. A certain degree of responsiveness was shown in return. We would go

for walks and visits, and get to know each other. Soon I made friends with some of the village youths, who also invited me to their homes. First we would have a wash in the home-built birch-wood sauna, and then dinner. To have an extra meal was marvellous.

Some old people in the village had small farms, which they found hard to look after on their own. They started asking me to help here and there. Naturally I didn't refuse, for again my stomach was my master. I will always remember the Ogurtsovsky family. Vassily, a young man of about my age, and I became good friends. He'd had some education, and was quite intelligent, understanding and sensitive. He worked as a meteorologist. We discussed a lot of topics and he frequently invited me to his place, where he offered me food and home-made spirits. Friendly relations developed with the whole family. In the spring of 1942 Vassily was called up and I lost track of him.

Working in the kolkhoz was a bizarre experience. For a start, the conditions were strange to us, especially because we weren't used to working in such a slipshod way. I clearly remember the time we began digging a pit for silage. All six of us Latvian men were doing the digging. A local man always came along to give the orders. We would dig for about 15 minutes and have a smoke for half an hour, because after a little while the local would suggest a rest, saying something to this effect, «That'll do for the time being. Let's have a rest and a smoke. Horses drop dead from overwork.» We used to get up early, at about half past five in the morning to get to the silage pit, which was quite far away. We were taken there in a cart. We were given strict orders to be on time, but usually we had to wait for our transport for two hours or more.

Other jobs, such as raking and stacking hay, were carried out with a similar attitude. Only the deportees were assigned this

work. We were allocated a certain area. All of us were fairly familiar with this task. Mr Andrēns supervised us. We raked up the hay properly and then stacked it up in large piles reinforced with branches, as we were used to do in our homeland. A Russian kolkhoz worker from the group of Russians working nearby approached Mr Andrēns and had a serious and lengthy discussion about something. It turned out that he had given some advice – to use a different method of haymaking, namely, not to make large haystacks, but small ones because payment was according to the number of haystacks. The way we were doing it, we wouldn't earn much. And so we shook our heads and shrugged our shoulders in bafflement and tried to rearrange everything.

It was certainly interesting to see our ladies at times looking indescribably ridiculous as they worked with rakes and pitchforks in the kolkhoz hayfields, wearing high-heeled shoes and flimsy dresses. But what could they do if that was all they had? The work, however, was done conscientiously.

Now a little about my foster mother, Helēna Birzniece, who was an intelligent, educated person. She was very honest and objective. Within a short time she had gained the respect of both the deportees and the local villagers. The most important principle that she would remind us about again and again was never to lose our humanity and culture. She knew a great deal about medicine and had some experience, too, because before her marriage she had gone to university and worked in a hospital. She had not completed her studies, but medicine remained an abiding interest throughout her life. The local people soon heard about her expertise and talent and often sought her help in various accidents. Mother could always give useful advice and always knew what was needed. She usually visited the patient herself and treated

him or her with different herbal teas, which gave good results. Both of us benefited from her activities. When she returned from yet another visit, she would have under her arm a small bag of flour, a piece of meat or a couple of kilos of potatoes, all of which in our situation were just about the greatest riches.

An interesting thing about smoking. There were hardly ever any cigarettes or cigarettes with cardboard holders in shops. Only the so-called mahorka, which we had never seen before, was available. We were even more astounded when we saw the way it was smoked. It turned out to be quite an art requiring some time to learn. The tobacco was unlike the one our grandfathers grew and smoked, one they cut into strips and rolled in tissue paper. Mahorka was rough and grainy, and it was rolled in newspaper like a cigar or cigarillo to form a good-sized roll which, when the sides were licked, stuck together, with the tobacco in the middle. You had to know how to tear off the required piece of newspaper – straight and following the fibre, otherwise the cigarette couldn't be rolled and smoking didn't give the desired pleasure. My poor, dear mother had a hard time. Although she loved smoking, she couldn't get used to this tobacco and at first had even decided to quit that harmful habit, but without success. She continued to smoke, but I had to roll the cigarettes because she just couldn't do it, her adeptness in other areas notwithstanding.

The summer months flew by as if in a kaleidoscope, and I gained a wealth of impressions. I grew accustomed to the local conditions. I was better at it than the rest of my fellow sufferers, probably because of my frivolous nature.

Autumn came, wet and cold, with long periods of rain, just like in our homeland. But this season did not last long, a month and a half at most, then it was winter and the cold. We had never

experienced such a cold, perhaps only read about it. Of course none of us had clothing suited to the Siberian winter, and both creativity and intelligence were needed if we were to protect our bodies to some extent in such horrifically low temperatures. Our womenfolk set to work on creating clothing for their sons and husbands. They



A hat made from a blanket.

succeeded, too. Though not fashion pieces, their creations served their purpose, and with God's help we survived the winter. The most important items were foot- and headwear, though to be honest, everything was important. I had a hat made from a blanket. It was thick and warm, and covered my ears and neck. Winter footwear was made from hessian that had been obtained with great difficulty from somewhere. The boots reached up to my knees, had a tarpaulin sole and cotton wool or similar padding. They were alright to walk in.

The most important task for us men was getting firewood. It wasn't as easy as it seemed, even though the forest was on our doorstep. The authorities took pity on us and issued us with an old saw as well as an axe, the latter obviously worth its weight in gold. Thus equipped, we would set off into the taiga with a small sled and fell huge trees. There in the snow we would chop off the branches, saw the immense log in half and drag it home, where we chopped it up and used it in the cast iron stove. A lot of firewood was needed to warm our large room.

My partner was invariably Valdis Adamovičs. We became very good friends. He was, among other things, a good chess player. He knew the theory well and enlightened me and Juris Andrēns on the secrets of this game. Juris, who had an innate talent for

woodcarving (many years later he worked as a furniture designer in Latvia and some of his work was exhibited in Montreal), made a board and carved very fine chess pieces.

During the winter we didn't do much work in the kolkhoz, except some small jobs indoors. When the temperature was well below zero, fog covered the entire area. The response of the local inhabitants to the extreme cold was the usual, unflinching, «Cold», and that was all. I vividly remember one occasion. One day in bone-chilling cold, as I was going to the well to fetch some water, I saw two elderly, well, old-timers, in fact, approaching each other from different directions. They stopped and looked at each other. One of them said, «Cold (*expletive!*).» The other one replied, «Sure is (*expletive!*).» End of dialogue. Each went his separate way. That's what our life was like.

Having a bath in a sauna was an important event. The Ogurtsovsky family, wonderful people, usually invited me to theirs. This was something new and unique. The heat was enough to take your breath away. We would flap ourselves with birch switches to our heart's content, and when the heat became intolerable, rush out stark naked into the -40°C cold, roll around in the snow and run back into the sauna. This procedure was repeated several times. After that we would gather in the family room to have something to eat and drink home-distilled



In a sauna.

spirits. Sometimes, but only on special occasions, commercially made spirits were served. These people certainly knew how to drink – from large glasses, filled to the brim. When first offered one of these, I was puzzled; however, I picked up enough courage to empty that glass, as did the others. I wasn't going to appear faint-hearted and bring shame on my nation! It wasn't too bad, and I became accustomed to it. Soon «the natives» accepted me as one of their own.

The times when the villagers farewelled the newly conscripted soldiers, or those who had already served in the army but were still eligible for service, have remained deeply etched on my memory. Almost the entire village would turn up. There was endless weeping and lamenting. Heartrending scenes of hugging and attempts to stop the loved one from leaving. These scenes were repeated whenever there was a call-up. You could understand and sympathise with these people.

Alcohol gradually began to play an important role in our life in dislocation, not because of a desire to drink, but purely because of our financial situation. Delivery of spirits to the shops was infrequent, but people here loved to drink, especially at farewells. On such occasions there was never enough of this commodity and they always ran short of it. So when this beverage was delivered, we, the «bandits», would stand in a long queue to obtain the much-desired bottle or even two, if you were lucky. We exchanged the spirits for flour, potatoes, eggs and other food. These transactions were always successful and there was no need to haggle. Being by nature rather active, this was one way I managed to at least make ends meet.

That winter we buried Mrs Strunke and Mrs Tukumniece, the first victims of deportation. Mrs Adamoviča said a moving good-

bye. At that time I had no idea that eventually the death toll would be incredibly high.

As the winter was drawing to an end, our thoughts turned to spring and summer. My mother had obtained some seedlings and started planting potatoes for the next winter. Moreover, the news that she was a trained nurse had gradually spread in the village and reached the local hospital. The doctor in charge invited her to come in for a talk, with the result that she was employed as a doctor's assistant on a fixed wage and regular, though small food rations.

We couldn't help noticing that the village families had many children between the ages of four and six, and all of them healthy. When I mentioned this in conversations with my local friends, they explained that there had been ten or eleven children, but the others had died. So that was the reason! Presumably only the fittest had survived, the weak had not. The survivors were physically well-developed and fairly clever, considering the not too high standard of education. One of these was my friend Vassily.

In the spring of 1942 Mother was employed at the hospital and I was working in the fields, and we had already planted something for winter. There was a sudden turn of events which changed our lives drastically. We had to pack our belongings and leave. No-one was told where or why. I washed and got dressed. Then I quickly did the rounds to say goodbye to my village friends and thank them for their help and kindness. After that we all sat around waiting. What was going to happen next? Nearly all of us were to be sent somewhere else. If I remember correctly, very few were left – the weakest and the young, and even then only if they had no families. And so, with whatever belongings we had left, we set off for an unknown destination. Once again we left behind a small garden plot, a skill half learned, a profession, and above

all, a place and its people with whom we had developed friendly relations. We took with us whatever we had managed to exchange or obtain in some way, as well as a small amount of food issued by the state.

We were sent to Abana, the regional centre. Many Latvians from the neighbouring kolkhozes were already there, and more kept arriving. After a few days we were taken to the town of Kansk. The journey in horse-drawn carts took two days. We spent the night in the open and were very cold.

In Kansk we were crammed into a huge area with a lot of people. I don't think we were under guard, so we were able to walk around the town, but to stay there or try to escape would have been absurd – we had no passports or anything else that could have inspired us do so. About a year before we had been sent off in all directions from here. A year later the change in people was marked. Differences in people's characters became obvious. Some were downcast, apathetic, indifferent to everything, worn out, careless towards themselves and others. They were incapable of understanding what was happening and had lost their willpower and capacity to put up a fight. Others were determined to find the ways and means to survive, and grab the slightest opportunity to pull through. Even though their clothes were mended and somehow tacked together, they were presentable. And there were enterprising people who tried to obtain something somehow, trick someone into buying something or do some work.

From Kansk we were transported to Krasnoyarsk, the regional capital. We met even more Latvians there. Huge masses of people were there, many thousands. Enormous barges were waiting for us by the banks of the Yenisey River. In orderly lines and fairly quickly, we were put on these floating vessels, immense containers

that had been prepared for us. Three, in some sections even four-level bunks were ready for us. The KGB officials, as usual, didn't bother to explain anything. There were apparently 3500 people on this particular barge.

We travelled for a long time and a very long way. We saw cliffs and forests, wild, beautiful and primeval nature. We left behind inhabited villages and towns such as Igarka, where many people were put ashore. As I discovered in Latvia many years later, only very few of them survived. Slowly, gradually we were approaching the region of the midnight sun.

On the decks people were boiling soup from the dry rations issued and whatever they had exchanged. The first lice appeared. I hadn't seen them before. I noticed that my body was more and more itchy, so I went to my mother, who was working in the first aid room. I took off my shirt and showed it to her. Insects I'd never seen before were crawling in it. Mother sighed and said they were lice. As it turned out, they were our companions for a long time after that.

We often sang, mainly folksongs and several patriotic, though sad songs. Such singing in unison greatly lifted our spirits and gave us inner strength. Things seemed easier to bear. I don't think I realised that at the time. It wasn't until many years later that I understood what it had meant to us.

The journey continued until we were told to disembark in groups at certain points, presumably according to a plan. We sang our well-loved songs as we said goodbye to the group leaving. Gradually our numbers decreased, and soon it was our turn. We were left in Nikolyska, about 60 kilometres from Dudinka, where a fishing kolkhoz had been established. There were still forests all around. So-called free persons arrived at the same time; they were

assigned to supervise our life and activities. They were known as instructors. One of them was responsible for communist ideology and could have been the leader, the hierarchy was not very clear.

Some Germans from the Volga region were also deported there. They spoke a dialect that was hard to understand, but with time I managed to communicate in their language. Many of them were young, and almost all were members of the Komsomol (Young Communist League). Some had passports, others were deportees, but Komsomol members nevertheless.

It was a warm summer. For the time being we were living in a half-finished log house. Many of us were assigned to work in construction brigades. I was assigned to fishing, a completely new job for me. We fished on the left bank of the Yenisey, that is, on the bank opposite the settlement. Some time later I had to work on a building site on the right bank, and following that, sawing planks. This took some getting used to. It was all manual labour, and it certainly wasn't easy, considering the food rations we were given. It was sheer heaven to collapse on the bunk beside Mother in the evening, close my eyes and feel and think nothing. We were accustomed to neither the hard work nor the perpetual daylight.

And so a new period began, long and bringing many changes. It's difficult to recall everything in a chronological sequence, but I vividly remember some colourful moments.

October on the banks of the Yenisey. The river here is 16–18 km wide. It was very cold. We slept in tents, side by side. My big toe got frostbite because it had protruded too much from under the blanket. I had to rub it with snow for quite a while to save it. For a long time after that it was very sensitive.

Our job was to pull out timber logs and planks that were already frozen in the river, and were to be used for building houses

and a fish processing factory. This building material was floated down the river for that purpose. We used crowbars to hack the logs out of the ice and stacked them on the bank. Absolutely everyone who could move took part in this activity. Old people and children were considered spongers and got no more than 400 g of bread a day.

I remember some kind of eatery, where food was issued to workers in exchange for coupons. There was a blue, watery soup we called «the blue Danube». It was water thickened with flour, and you could consider yourself lucky if a dumpling or a lump of flour was in your bowl. We were given «hvoja», an infusion of pine needles before the meal. This was to prevent scurvy. You couldn't get any food unless you drank a glass of this first.

The work was hard. We suffered from the arctic cold, exhaustion, apathy and lice. I began turning yellow and lost my appetite. Around that time we were moved into barracks. Ours was number 9, with double bunks close together. There was a cast-iron stove in the middle. I became ill with jaundice and was given sick leave. The fact that my organism was young played a decisive role, as did my mother's selfless nursing, so that I was able to recover and be on my feet within about a month. However, I was no longer as strong as before. We were earning a ridiculously small wage. I resigned myself to not being able to work in my present condition. I was overcome by apathy and hunger. I recall stealing flour. My friend Jānis Streipa, who was about my age but much taller and likewise all skin and bones, found a flour store. It was guarded, but if you went out in a snowstorm when, as they say, the earth and the sky are topsy-turvy, you could reach the store from an almost hidden side, push a board aside and get a glimpse of a bag of flour. Then all you had to do was make a hole in the top

one, and the flour poured out freely into the cloth bag brought for that purpose. I was most grateful to Jānis. You could mix this flour with water, shape it into a pancake, put it on the stove and fry. What a delicacy! Only I had to promise not to mention a word about it to anyone. In fact this business involved a great deal of risk. What would happen if you were caught? Severe punishment. Several years in a forced-labour camp would be guaranteed, although that might not have been any worse than the terrible enslavement here.

Then gradually, relentlessly came the time of countless deaths. People died. They died of cold, hunger and inhuman living conditions. We couldn't dig graves for everyone in the permafrost. We had to use dynamite. We didn't have enough energy, either. When the spring floods came, bodies reappeared above the ground. All of us were suffering from vitamin deficiency – we were not getting any potatoes or any other vegetables, let alone garlic or onions. People fell ill with typhoid fever, meningitis and scurvy, and died in the barracks or in our small hospital, where there was not enough room for everyone.

I vividly remember eighteen-year-old Ozoliņš dying in our barrack. He came back from work one evening, lay down and began moaning loudly. We could do nothing to help him, except give him some water and cover him with blankets. He didn't have any relatives, not a soul. I think his mother had died in the kolkhoz. Little by little he grew quiet, until finally he passed away. Huge swarms of lice started deserting the lifeless body. We woke up to this fact in time, and took the young man's clothes and bedclothes out into the -40°C temperature. Everything became covered with tiny white specks – frozen insects.

On another occasion a young Latvian woman came over from the so-called death barrack, number 6, I think, and asked if any-

one could help lift off the top bunk yet another victim of the Grim Reaper. I volunteered. Again it was a young Latvian boy, completely alone. All around him were apathetic, emaciated people. I felt like crying, but the tears wouldn't come. With perfect clarity and without fear or horror, I pictured and was prepared for a similar end for myself.

Maija Kuplais, a talented pianist at the Latvian Conservatorium of Music, also died. We all felt the loss keenly, for we had become very fond of her on account of her character and demeanour. We felt dreadfully sorry for her mother, the daughter of a newspaper editor. She returned to Latvia and later, I believe, was allowed to emigrate to Sweden.

Another case was of a mother and her two sons. The mother and one of her children were seriously ill, on the brink of death, in fact. The other son, completely apathetic and indifferent to what was happening, put his bread ration on his brother's chest and cut off one small slice after another to satisfy his hunger.

Never-ending darkness. A pale, grey day would dawn at about ten o'clock, only to disappear at two in the afternoon.

Aurora borealis. We saw it for the first time in our lives, an awe-inspiring sight. It is a grand, beautiful and mighty, magical and fleeting phenomenon.

Bread. Strictly rationed – 800 g, 600 g, 400 g, depending on your category. It was supposed to be enough. The categories were labourer, office worker and freeloader. The last group consisted of children, elderly people and the temporarily ill who couldn't work and were cared for by their relatives – mothers, brothers and so on. Other food issues were minimal – a little sugar, butter or oil.

It was extremely difficult to obtain firewood. There simply wasn't any. Those who worked in building brigades were able to

bring home some wood chips, the rest managed as best they could. There were no trees around, no forest, only the tundra with small, shrivelled up bushes like a wire mesh. We used to go to the tundra, which was nearby, gather what we could and take it back to the barracks. The bushes didn't burn on their own, a lot of kindling was needed. But they gave out a reasonable amount of heat. Soon we began stealing firewood, there was no alternative. We stole whatever we could lay our hands on – logs and planks, timber that was meant for building houses. I remember during a snowstorm I even tore down a toilet somewhere that had been put together from boards. I dragged the dry boards back to the barrack. They burnt well and everyone felt a little warmer.

The cold was our worst enemy, and so, not even fearing punishment, we stole. We often heard the saying, «Winter lasts for twelve months, the rest of the year is summer.» A committee of building inspectors arrived one day in summer. They discovered that timber for at least ten houses had been burnt. The chairman apparently said that these people could not be punished because they had done it in extreme circumstances. Some officials, it must be said, were compassionate, even humane to a certain degree.

The so-called left bank of the Yenisey River played an important part in our lives. We thought and talked about it a lot. It seemed fabulous, this left bank. There was no shortage of anything there, in that land of plenty. It turned out that teams of geologists were employed there, exploring for minerals and oil. They were incomparably better provided for than we, with food, clothing and accommodation. We were not allowed to see them, at least for the time being. At any rate, they were free people, Soviet citizens with passports. Occasionally they visited us on the right

bank, and contacts developed. As a result, those of us who still had something left from better days had the opportunity, as well as a reason for getting rid of their finery. The people from the left bank were willing to barter. Money hardly ever changed hands. There were exceptions, to be sure, when money was necessary, but the main thing was food and, especially in the north, warm clothing and felt boots. Many of the free people here walked around in clothing made of deer or dog fur. Jewellery, if you had any, a good quality garment, silk and velvet were exchanged. There was no demand for such items in the kolkhoz, but it was a different story on the left bank. Here we were dealing with intelligent, cultured people, who were well-off besides. If memory serves me right, relationships of a different kind also developed between both sides. Paradoxically, flirting and intimacy had their place here, too. Such relationships increased the chance of survival, and those members of the fair sex who had formed these friendships were already, so to speak, on the road to success.

Who else among us was better off? It was the Jews. I had been brought up in a democratic climate, in which chauvinism was unknown, and now saw proof here in these conditions of this nation's sense of identity and feelings of solidarity. These people stuck together, helped and supported each other far more than did other nations.

Tribute must be paid to the women and mothers with children. Such a lot of selflessness and willpower were necessary to ensure your own bare survival and help your children! No matter what, you had to survive, all the time hoping that one day, even if it was in the distant future, things would change. What the mothers did was nothing short of heroic, because many children did return home and began leading a normal life. Nevertheless there were

countless mothers, who, despite their devotion and self-sacrifice, couldn't do a thing to prevent their own and their cherished children's death. One of the Freibergs brothers was a tragic example. He was returning from a neighbouring village in a horsedrawn cart when he froze to death. Obviously he hadn't had the strength to walk alongside the cart. Attempts to revive him in the bathhouse were unsuccessful.

There was also the case of a woman who went out to relieve herself during a bad snowstorm and couldn't find her way back. Snowstorms accompanied by extremely low temperatures were called «White Death». That's when snow comes whirling down in huge flakes, covering everything including your eyes, ears and nose. Weather conditions with temperatures hovering around zero were called «Black Death».

1943. In the middle of that year I became seriously ill and almost died. I have a clear recollection of how it all began and how I suffered. Now and then bread was not issued for several days because of various unforeseen circumstances. Eventually we would get the bread owing to us together with that day's ration. So one evening I returned to the barrack with a large amount of bread. I was looking forward to the meal I was about to enjoy. I still had some sugar left. In absolute bliss, I sat down, boiled some water in a mug, added the sugar and polished off the bread. I still remember the wonderful feeling. What a meal! I ate a lot, at least a kilo, I think, and all in one go. I paused a little, then ate and ate some more. It was no longer normal behaviour, but that's what all of us, with few exceptions, were like.

After a few hours I had a terrible stomach ache, then diarrhoea that continued for a long time. When it stopped, I felt extremely weak. I found it very difficult to move about. My temperature rose.

Then my bones started to ache and the pain became increasingly worse. The diagnosis was scurvy. My weight loss was critical. I was dreadfully, appallingly tired and couldn't sleep because of pain. My temperature was as high as 40°C and I had hallucinations, in which I thought my brother was lying next to me. He seemed to be my twin and wanted to take me somewhere. In fact I have no brothers or sisters. Our people came to believe that I would not be in this world much longer. I lay there as stiff as a board, my arms and legs tensed up, and blinked. I remember that as if it were yesterday. I was acutely aware of thinking, «Look, I can still blink.» Yet, for the first time in my life, I was waiting for the Grim Reaper, who would release me from my suffering. I was twenty-one at the time.

At one stage, when I was more or less conscious, I asked my friend to lift me down from the bunk if he could, and, before I breathed my last, show me the people who were here in the barrack with me. He did so, carrying me on one arm from one end to the other, I had become so light.

Thank God my beloved mother did everything humanly possible. There was only one form of treatment – vitamin C, garlic and onions, which we didn't have. And suddenly a thought occurred to her – the left bank! There was no shortage of garlic or onions there. We managed to get some, but not for free or a simple «thank you», of course. Nothing was spared, and so we had to part with mementoes of my father, the most valuable things we had. One was the gold watchcase with an inscription, and the other was the gold letters that my father's friends had put on his cigarette-case as a sign of their friendship and esteem. At any rate, I gradually recovered, and around 1 July I was already on the list of those able to work.

People were needed in fishing brigades. There were rough shacks on the banks of the Yenisey, more or less suitable as dwellings for people while they fished and caught animals and birds. The main thing was that clothing and fairly decent food rations were issued. If you filled the set quota, we were told, your food ration was increased, if not, it was decreased considerably. I calculated that in either case I would be able to survive on fish and anything else I caught. So fishing it was.

We began making preparations. People from our village stayed on a small island in the Yenisey. There were eight of us. Olafs Gūtmanis, a young man of about eighteen, who is now a poet, was elected work brigade leader. Despite his youth and lack of experience, he rose to the occasion and coped well. I was older than he, but well aware that I could not have managed as well because of my impractical nature. I was, moreover, still weak after my illness, and my main aim was to recover enough to survive.

A couple of my friends found a new source of income, namely trapping birds. A large number of partridges appeared in the tundra, especially towards spring. They were white and edible. You could sell them to the state. You caught them using nooses attached to willows. A bud from the willow was stuck in the snow in the middle of the noose and acted as bait. The bird's head or foot entangled in the noose, and the bird was in the bag. My friends showed me how to do it, and after a while I was quite successful. We set up the nooses a fair distance from our huts, because partridges need peace and quiet, and dislike being disturbed. And so we caught enough for ourselves and to sell to the state. What a treat frozen breast of partridge was! Mostly we boiled them with dumplings made from flour we got as dry rations. Our stomachs were full, and that was quite an achievement considering that, try as we might, we were always hungry.

Next we caught owls. They were big, white, tasty and fatty. They taste a little like geese, but you did have to fry or boil them for a long time before they were tender and edible. There was a great demand for them also, and they sold for 50 roubles each. I remember my first owl. I nearly lost my eyes. As I was walking up to inspect my nooses, I noticed from afar that something was moving in the snow near the stake I had driven in. Sure enough, an owl. I pounced on it helter-skelter, but the wretched bird, snare and all, went straight for my eyes. I jumped back just in time. I killed it with a stick and shoved it in my bag.

On Good Friday, 1944, after several days of snowstorms, when it was impossible to even consider fishing or hunting, the sun came out as bright as could be. Although one of the Latvian mothers advised me not to attempt tasks on such a day, I set out for my snares. They were unfortunately covered with snow, so I had to dig them out. It was finicky work. I retrieved my nooses, untangled them, took the ensnared partridges and fiddled around for a while. Suddenly I sensed a kind of unease, excitement, and an uncanny feeling came over me. I looked up and saw two wolves standing a mere ten paces from me and staring at me with glowing eyes. I stood up and froze. Beads of cold perspiration formed on my brow. It didn't last long, perhaps only a few seconds. Then the animals turned abruptly and bounded off. I picked up my partridges and set off for home as fast as I could.

On another occasion, again while checking the snares, I was almost snowed in. I only realised it when it was dark and I could hardly see anything. Where was the riverbank, the path with the marker stakes? Not a sign of them. Chilled to the bone, I wandered around for quite a while. Luckily the moon appeared briefly and I could see the contours of the shore, a good landmark. I stumbled

upon the dwelling of a Nenets¹, where I thawed out and was given some hot, strong tea laced with spirits.

Winter nights were long. We were given the fat of beluga or some other sea animal for lighting. It was soaked in petrol or kerosene to prevent us from eating it, believe it or not. We would put a wick in the fat, light it, and obtain minimal light. We used to have long discussions about a lot of topics. At one time I had been studying music, so I knew quite a few arias and libretti from operas. My knowledge of literature wasn't to be sneezed at, either. My companions were interested to hear me sing and tell stories. I must say that the spiritual wealth one has acquired is of great help in difficult situations, albeit only morally. But it helps to survive. Famous people like Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, Goethe, Shakespeare, the Latvian poet Rainis, Socrates, Dostoevsky, Ham- sun and many others who have given the world lasting works of art, all of them lift your spirits and stop you from being destroyed. I am grateful to my parents for encouraging me above all to appreciate spiritual values.

¹ *The Nenets* – one of the original ethnic groups inhabiting Northern Siberia.

THE DAY THAT CHANGED MY LIFE

Juris Šnore

I don't really know when I first became aware of the world around me. Be that as it may, it was about 47 years ago, around the year 1940.

I recall that my grandfather had bought me grey tin soldiers in various positions – standing, aiming either down on one knee or lying down, running or marching. Even though they were smaller than the colourful ones in other sets, and though I had chewed off the heads of some, the grey ones were my favourites. I used to play with them on the floor in my grandfather's small, sunny room. I also remember playing with Grandfather's heavy watch chain while sitting on his stomach. Apparently he was two metres tall and, according to the anthropologists at the university, these measurements tallied with those of the bones found in the burial places of the ancient inhabitants of Zemgale¹. I must have been very young.

My next memory is of a day in winter. Tanks were grinding their way through snow from the Korf Garden in Bauska to the Pilsmuiža school. Obviously they were Red Army tanks in the winter of 1940/1941. Someone was pulling me in a sled, and

¹ *Zemgale* – a region of Latvia.

I was afraid of these roaring monsters. I barely managed to stop myself from screaming.

I remember how I and a boy just like me marched up to each other, three-cornered hats folded from newspaper on our heads, and saluted each other saying, «Greetings, comrade!» Children of that age usually learned other words in Russian. I was different. I learned those various other combinations somewhat later.

14 June, 1941 was a fateful day for me. I don't remember the night we were rounded up at «Līgotņi» in the Bauska region. But I do remember my granny handing two bags through the open door of the freight car at Iecava station. She was wearing a beret. I saw my stepfather's face once at the carriage window. The window was just below the roof and there were bars on it. My stepfather was smiling and saying something. Men were on one train, women and children on another. The trains had halted alongside each other. An unimaginable uproar broke out on both trains. Women were shouting, children were crying, men were banging on the doors and walls and trying to break the bars on the windows. The soldiers guarding the trains were running around in confusion and also yelling something. The noise died down when the men's train was shunted away.

Several soldiers were fairly talkative and our mothers enquired as to where we were being taken. They didn't know much, except that it was in an easterly direction. That was obvious from the position of the sun. Convoy soldiers weren't in the know, they were just following orders.

I don't remember what we ate on the journey, but there was enough until we reached the destination. We had a rather large piece of smoked ham with us. Mother would cut a thin slice for each of us. It was utterly delicious. In the following years I could hardly

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recall what meat tasted like, and when I returned to Latvia and lived at my grandmother's, I ate very little and only the leanest kind.

I don't know how and where we spent the first autumn and winter. I do know that I was very cold, there was a lot of snow and fierce blizzards that raged for several days and nights.

In winter we usually wore thick clothes, woollen socks, thick shawls or fur hats, padded jackets and felt boots. An appropriately clothed person did not have to fear winter. People who were going somewhere for a longer time wore long fur coats called «tulup» or «doha». I'm not sure how they differed. The former seemed to be a little lighter with fur on the inside, whereas the latter were very big and were made from dog fur with the fur on the outside. It was often mottled, depending on what was available. The best footwear for travelling were heavy boots, also made from dog fur, with fur on the inside as well as the outside. You wouldn't freeze in them even when you wore them on bare feet. People who didn't have warm clothing were much worse off. We were among those, and we stayed indoors. The most important thing, after all, was having enough firewood and food. To this day I have no idea where Mother got them.

Men had been conscripted. I only remember the «big» boys, no older than seventeen, and the old men. I liked the old men. They were most impressive. They had shaggy beards with tobacco spittle and bits of food perpetually sticking in them. The beard near the bottom lip was yellowish-brown, probably from mahorka, and lighter further down because of old age, of course. Their hair was dishevelled and their eyebrows were long and thick. I can't recall seeing a bald man, not that men in Siberia didn't go bald. It was simply that I didn't happen to meet any.

The old men could do any task: resole felt boots, plait long shepherd's whips, make harness equipment, fix carts and sleighs,

make skis, hunt, mess around with bees, spit magnificently, drive horsecarts, fell trees, build a variety of structures, repair roofs and buildings, distil and drink home-made spirits, grow tobacco and when annoyed, let fly a string of words in a stunning sequence. These I learned fast, and to a high level of proficiency. I loved listening to the old hunters' stories of how they had hunted bears and sables and fought off wolves. Quite a few men's faces and limbs were disfigured. These scars were lasting reminders of their battles with bears.

Hunters had short skis without bindings, but with a kind of boot at the toe end into which you stepped, felt boots and all. The bottom of the skis was covered with some hide in such a way that the fur allowed you to slide forwards but not backwards, so it was easier to go uphill. In the taiga the hunters had their own shacks with everything needed for a person who happened to be there to survive. There was bread, meat dumplings, milk, meat, dry firewood and kindling, a wick-light as well as a kerosene lamp, a tin stove, some essential crockery, a table, a bench, an axe and so on.

The hut had one tiny window and a door that opened inwards. The door was made that way to enable you to make your way out if there was a snowdrift, and also to prevent a bear from opening it. There was no key, only a cleverly made wooden device, which stopped a bear from entering the hut. A bear never pushes, it always pulls things.

Siberian men started a fire with home-made lighters. These did not use petrol, methylated spirits or gas. They consisted of three components: tinder, flint and a steel chip forged according to the owner's fancy. The tinder was held to the piece of flint with the left thumb while striking with the right one. The old fellows had dried out the tinder so well that a tiny spark was enough to make

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it glow. Then they would blow on it and it would glow even more. These experts probably took a few seconds longer to start a fire than we do nowadays with matches. The tinder was obtained from tree fungus and peeled and dried.

By today's standards, we were a big family: me, Jānītis, Elga, Egils and Mother; and Jānītis', Elga's and Egils' grandfather. Their surname was Vasariņš. I had a different surname, being my mother's son from her first marriage. I think Grandfather died as early as winter, 1941. I have no idea how, where or when he was buried. When Jānītis died, it was already the winter of 1942. We were then living in some kind of children's home. In fact, the whole village was a children's home. Orphans must have been gathered there. Mother was working in this home. I don't know what her job was, except that it wasn't as a labourer.

The winter was cold and grim. We were constantly hungry, our stomachs were never full. On one occasion Mother had obtained a little more food than usual, but she didn't allow us to eat it all in one evening. We decided to store it in the basement under the floorboards. When we opened the basement door, we saw that our dish was at the far end and there was not a morsel of food left. It hadn't even occurred to us that rats also had to eat. From then on, if there were any leftovers, we would put them into a pot, and cover it with a lid and some firewood or some other heavy objects. Rats came into our room also, and ran around on our beds, but luckily they didn't get a taste of our noses or ears. A mosquito flying around at night is unpleasant, let alone rats frolicking on your bed.

That winter we were all ill. We wanted to go outdoors, but there was nothing to put on our feet. How long can you stay outside in the snow barefoot? Egils and Elga were older and attended the orphanage school, while Jānītis and I stayed at home. But we

couldn't refrain from going outside. We would tie two small boards to our feet and take turns to go out. Between us we had a shabby little coat. When the older children came home from school, we would put on their boots. Egils was wiser than Elga and didn't lend his clothes. And so in this way we got «fitness training». We caught whooping cough. I suffered longer than Jānītis. One day towards evening, while Mother was in Krasnoyarsk, Jānītis, who was in bed, took three deep breaths that sounded like a long moan. He had drawn his last breath...

Spring came. As soon as the snow was gone, I felt free. I didn't need much, just a pair of pants and some food in my stomach. But food was scarce in spring because nothing had grown yet. Egils was already a big boy, over 12 years old. He knew how to put a bridle on a horse and could start working on the orphanage farm. There were three of us out on the field in the taiga – the horse, Egils and I. We had some bread with us. While Egils and the horse were working, I would light a fire. We could already pick sorrel and ramson, a plant similar to garlic, as well as «saranka»², a floury, nourishing plant that had a big bulb like that of a tulip.

While the horse was resting, Egils would sneak up to a flock of blackbirds with a club in his hand. A few throws, and we would have a fine meal. It was even better if the field was near a river. There were masses of fish, you only had to know how to catch them. You could catch groundlings by their tails or backs with just a hook. They were small but tasty enough. At times our whole

² *Saranka* – In spring this plant saved many deportees from starving to death. The local people advised them to look for the new shoots of the plant, dig out the bulbs and cook them, instead of gathering frozen, rotting potatoes left over in the fields from the previous autumn. Only pigs were allowed to forage in the fields after the harvest.

family could get a square meal out of them. Later, when I was about 6 or 7 years old, together with some Russian boys I learned a better way of catching fish. Men would build dams over the rivers of Siberia, which were small but abundant in fish. Stakes close together were driven into the river bed right across from one bank to the other. Only water and small fish could pass through. A wicker basket was placed at an opening in the barrier. Our task was to check this trap before its owner did. There were always fish in it. The biggest fish I once saw, a salmon trout, was as big as a man. The fisherman was carrying it slung over his shoulder and its tail was dragging on the ground.

It was easier to get food in summer. All kinds of plants were ripe not only in the woods but also in gardens and fields. In addition to ramson and «saranka», you could get turnips, beetroot, swedes, cabbage and grain. New larchtree needles were tasty, too. Perhaps that's why at the age of 50, only five of my teeth are missing.

The situation improved as summer wore on. There were red and black currants, strawberries and blackberries. I was so sick of eating nettle soup in spring, that even now I eat sorrel or beet leaf soup only out of politeness towards the cook, I never make it myself. And I never eat stewed carrots or swedes either, we had to eat them so frequently in winter.

The black currants in our gardens were as big as the ones in the Siberian taiga, where no-one fertilised or looked after them. The raspberries, bilberries and bird-cherries were as big as our cherries and cedar nuts. People gathered bird-cherries, dried and ground them, and cooked them in pies and in other ways. The pies were very tasty. Cedar nuts were sold cones and all. Peeling them out of the cone was a complicated procedure. The peeler would smudge so much resin over him- or herself that it would

take days to get it off. Little rascals like us didn't worry about the resin because we had it on the most unlikely places anyway as a result of climbing the cedar trees. The resin disappeared and the cones opened when they were boiled. The cones could also be fried and then shelled like nuts. In any case, these nuts were nutritious and filling. There were shells all over streets, floors and railway platforms, where the nuts were sold by the glass or jar. The shells would break under your shoe with a loud crackle, but cut into bare feet.

Picking the cedar nuts was difficult – you had to climb the tall tree, which had no branches at the bottom. Only very few managed it without using spikes. There were cases of people falling down. I heard stories of only tattered clothing with bones inside having been found in the branches. Anyway, it was impossible to bring back more than one bag from the taiga, the green cones were too heavy.

In autumn there were potatoes, cabbage and other root vegetables. Mother strictly forbade us to sneak into other people's gardens or into state-owned fields to pick something. But one's stomach didn't always give peace to one's mind or feet. Mother even made us learn the Lord's Prayer.

The seasons changed, winter followed autumn. The first few years were naturally very difficult, not so much for us children, as for our parents, or rather, mothers. However, I think it became easier with each passing year. The children were growing, they became physically fit, survived somehow and helped in some way. Some families acquired a goat or some other domestic animal. The deportees became used to the new environment.

It was somewhat easier for the local inhabitants – they had a roof over their heads, warm clothes suitable for the climate, over the centuries they had adapted themselves to the conditions, and

they were familiar with the flora and fauna. They cultivated small plots of land, and had seed and domestic animals. There were no husbands, life's heavy burden was borne by the women. But there were some old men who, although not able to work themselves, were quite good managers.

The Latvian women, on the other hand, had been forcibly sent away, children and all, from their homeland and their accustomed Europe. Having arrived in Asia, in Siberia, about which they had only heard in geography lessons, they neither could nor would acclimatise or adapt. For example, there was a Mrs Kurcēna, who didn't eat anything without salt, but there was no salt. So she ate raw beetroot, which she cleaned on her skirt, any grain at all and almost any kind of grass. I don't know what became of her. Another sad case was a classmate of my mother's. He had been released from a prison camp and arrived in our village one day. He could barely stand up and would fall asleep in an instant. Some boys stole his fishing rod when he fell asleep on the river bank. His sleepiness annoyed me and I told him so. He only smiled sadly. A few weeks later he died, and so remained in Siberia for ever. I'm ashamed of myself now.

Ribnoye was quite a large village, about 40 kilometres from the regional centre of Kozulyka. In those days the distance seemed enormous to me. Ribnoye was my world. The main street, the kolkhoz office, club, school, horse stable and the river, all these interested me. Elga and Egils were in the children's home. Things were easier for Mother.

I spent the summer in the main street and near the river, which was called Little Kemchooga. It wasn't big but it had plenty of fish. I didn't have proper fishing equipment or, to be more precise, what I had was totally inadequate, especially lines and

hooks. Fish often swam off with the hook, line and sinker. The banks of the river were overgrown or bare, with gentle or steep slopes, sandy or gravelly. There were all kinds of fish, some under rocks, in which case we could catch them with our bare hands, others such as pike and salmon trout were in deeper parts. We boys knew every shallow, dip, old river bed and bay. The river contributed to the family table.

In spring there was a wonderful display of flowers in the meadows, and shrubbery along the river and in the taiga as well. The colours ranging from green through to a very dark red were dazzling. I can't describe this brilliant range of colours. I still vividly remember the flower called «fire» in Russian. When it bloomed in the meadow, it seemed as if the meadow was on fire. I wonder what it would look like if it were illuminated. Another flower that fascinated me was «the cuckoo's tear», a delicate three-leaf blossom on a fragile stalk. It had a delightful scent. Not to mention all the big meadow plants with their white, yellow and other coloured flowers. These plants really were tall – a horse and rider would disappear among them. In 1954, when I was there once again, we hid a caterpillar tractor in a meadow, and the driver only found it by the tracks left behind. He probably wouldn't have found it a few days later, by which time the flattened grass would have come up again.

This type of meadow is a bee's paradise, and not only a bee's. Dragonflies, butterflies, gadflies, bumblebees and a multitude of other insects fly, buzz, hum, drone and whirr. The insects range in size from tiny to as large as your thumb. The honey collected from white blossoms is white, with a distinctive smell and taste. It's another of nature's wonders. Perhaps not everyone likes the taste of it, but I do. On one occasion my mother, in her job as the kolkhoz bookkeeper, took me along to one of the kolkhoz apiaries.

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It was located in the taiga and consisted of many colonies of bees. The apiary was enclosed by a palisade fence with the skulls of different animals on it. Bears presented the biggest threat to the apiaries, for honey is their greatest delicacy. That is why a beekeeper lives at the apiary and has a gun to frighten the unwelcome visitors away. The beekeeper in this case had a long beard and hairy arms, and worked with the bees without a net, relying only on a smoker. He treated us to some fresh honey and honeycomb in a large bowl, to eat with bread and fresh cucumbers. To this day I would give anything for a feast of this honey and cucumbers. Perhaps God and nature, wishing to imitate this food, have attempted to create something similar and given us the melon.

Our small garden was situated behind the kolkhoz office. Behind a meadow, about 700 m away, was the edge of the endless taiga. We grew everything we needed in the garden. The soil was fertile, everything including weeds flourished. Mother and I did the weeding and had a never-ending battle with nettles, couch-grass, goosefoot and other unwanted plants.

Fairly late one evening, as we were weeding, we heard a bear rumble several times in the taiga. The sound reverberated across the taiga. The bear was probably far away, but the sound of it made my hair stand on end. I was already half-way out of the garden when I remembered that Mother was still there. I begged her to come home. My lips were trembling and there was such fear on my face that my mother finally took pity on me and we went home.

I have always liked animals such as hedgehogs, cats, dogs and so on. The bigger the animal, the more I liked it. The kolkhoz had horses. Other boys liked them too, of course. We used to ride them to the river for a swim, water them and look after them. We rode bareback and often without a bridle. My favourite mare was

a large plump one, with big knobs on her legs. These knobs must have been the so-called glanders.

It was an important event at the kolkhoz when a tractor or a truck was sent from the Balahtona Machine and Tractor Station, about 20 kilometres away. The trucks worked for a day or two, but the tractor for at least two weeks. It was an interesting contraption of the kind you see only in museums nowadays. The big wheels and the double rows of firing-pins filled me with a sense of awe. Great was the honour for the boy who was allowed to sit in the driver's assistant's seat. My early experience with machinery has had a lasting effect on me. I learned to use all our usual machines before gaining my degree in engineering.

No less important were the film shows at the club. To produce the electricity needed, someone had to turn the generator or dynamo, as it was then called. The older boys did that so that they could see something of the film, but we the younger ones helped too. When the screen began to jerk, the audience would yell, «Keep turning, buddy!» They yelled at us, we in turn yelled at others. I have no idea what films were shown in those days. There was something about war, a tank approaching, and it seemed to me that any moment now we would all be crushed. But there was a happy ending, and we defeated those damned Germans, at least in the battles on the screen. However, one child was run over and I was very sorry for him. Mother said it was a doll, but I didn't really believe her.

One day some important regional officials arrived from Ribnoye in a Willis donated by the American Lend-lease³. What a vehicle! How green its steering wheel, how bright its lights, so many

³ *Lend-lease* – the legal means by which the United States assisted its allies during the Second World War. Lend-lease to the Soviet Union ended in 1945.

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reflectors both at the rear and on the sides! It drove off, and we stood there in the dust breathless and with our mouths open. From then on I worshipped cars.

In my opinion, the most important men in the village were the kolkhoz supervisor and the kolkhoz herdsman. The supervisor was serious and respected, he had a moustache and always a pipe in his mouth. What he said was law. When a meeting in the club was being organised, the stable hand was notified. He then assembled any available boys, gave them some horses, and we rode around the village hollering, «Come to the meeting at the club!»

The herdsman was a boy of about sixteen. Every morning he would start at one end of the village, and every owner drove her cow out through the gate onto the street. By the time he got to the other end, his herd was complete. He had a short-handled whip about six metres long, and he was an expert at using it. Woe to the cow that for some reason refused to go where she was told! The end of the whip never failed to reach its target. Sometimes he just cracked it for fun.

The cows grazed on the meadows and in the birch groves outside the village. They returned in the evenings and knew which gate was theirs. It wasn't customary to complain to a cow's owner if her cow or another animal got out through a fence and damaged someone's garden. The answer would simply be, «Put up a fence!» Animals were free to roam in the village. Every household had a fence. The side facing the street was built of mighty logs or planks, over or through which you couldn't see. The fence had one big and one small gate. If you wanted to see what was going on in the street, all you had to do was sit astride the fence and gape to your heart's content.

One day an army officer on leave arrived. That was just about a world event. He told us stories about Europe, the Germans and

the war. He left after a few days. The whole village, including me, saw him off. He went on foot, presumably to Balahtona. At the edge of the village, without turning around and still marching along, he drew his pistol and fired into the air three times. Did he return home from the war? Who knows.

The taiga extended from east of Ribnoye right up to the horizon. Dark green or bluish mountains were in that direction, and they merged with the sky. A forest fire broke out there once. That was an awesome sight. The entire skyline burned and blazed. At first there was only smoke, but later there were flames. It was terrible. What had started it? A campfire, a cigarette butt, perhaps a spark from a locomotive? The fire shifted around the mountains for a long time, three weeks according to my mother, until the rain came. When that happened, the flames were easier to see. An unusual spectacle – it was raining, steam was rising and tongues of fire were reaching out towards water. Eventually nature took care of it. Long after the rain, steam was still rising, but the fire was extinguished. Perhaps people had helped also. How great was the damage? How many trees were destroyed? Had animals and people perished? That remained a secret forever.

Autumn and winter were approaching once more. I turned six and was enrolled at school. September was still warm, but by the end of the month some snow fell. I had nothing to wear on my feet. Mother managed to clothe me somehow, but footwear was a problem. Until the end of October I used to dash to school barefoot across the snow. It was warm at school. If you sat on your feet, it was even better.

First I had to learn letters and numbers. I had no trouble with letters and was soon reading with ease, but my writing was clumsy. Numbers were alright, but mathematical problems gave me some

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trouble. My mother hadn't taught me the basic principles. She had, however, taught me reading and singing. I could read, recite poems and sing. At the top of my voice I would belt out «And long live our beloved comrade Stalin!» She taught me a lot of Latvian folksongs, too. One of them told of a young maiden, who did not break even a twig as she walked through a silvery birch grove. Had she done so, she would have been showered with silver. I cried because I felt sorry that Mother hadn't broken a twig and didn't have silver all over her. So she didn't sing this song any more.

I loved to ski. Mother got me a pair of skis, but they had no bindings and there were no poles. I made these myself. I used to go skiing early in the morning, so that the other children wouldn't laugh at me. The moon was still up when I set out for the gully at the other end of the village. The gully was deep, but I had my own trails, down which I'd fly like the wind.

One early morning I again went to the gully. When I arrived, I noticed five or six dogs gathered on the other side. They had pointed noses and were all the same size. Some were sitting, others were standing, still others were walking around. One of them howled. They were wolves, for goodness' sake! That was the first and only time I came face to face with wolves. From then on I no longer went skiing at night. By then I was as good as the village boys, and my skis had bindings and I wore felt boots. Later in Latvia I was one of the best skiers.

The winter was over and it was no longer cold. Life went on. The war was drawing to a close. Mother's hopes of returning home to Latvia rose. It didn't matter to me. I was interested in machines, horses and living things. However, we moved to Kozulyka, the regional centre, to live at Mrs Golikova's place. She didn't help us much, and we had to start from scratch again.

The summer ended, autumn came. It was off to school barefoot again. I had grown out of my old felt boots, but now school was close by, and the way there was along a timber footpath. Once again I would keep my feet warm by sitting on them. But not everything was bad. My grandmother sent me all sorts of pencils, erasers and exercise books with watermarks from the Līgatne papermill. Although some of these precious things were stolen, I got some. Around the beginning of October I got some boots, and now going to school was a pleasure and snow no longer pricked my feet.

Even though the war was nearly over, we were no better or worse off than at the beginning of it. The room we lived in wasn't particularly warm, so one of my chief duties was looking after the heating. I still regard a tin and cast iron stove as the most effective heating device. It heats up quickly, but cools down even faster.

From somewhere or other Mother had obtained some barley meal. It was white, easy to mix with water and made a very glutinous dough. On the top of the hot stove and without the aid of a pan, I would painstakingly prepare a variety of pastries – buns, rolls, rings and twists.

That cold winter our landlady's ewe had a lamb. Where could you put animals when the shed was so cold? In the tenants' rooms, of course. A space somewhat like a pen was created, and the ewe and its young were put into it. In those days such close co-existence didn't worry me at all. Something else bothered me. In Siberian houses there is a cold anteroom, and at the end of it the place one visits alone. A dog was always waiting there for visitors and eagerly sniffed what the visitor left behind. I was desperately sorry for the dog and secretly tried to save some of my own food. This toilet was only used in winter, so that people

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wouldn't have to walk through snow to the little outhouse behind the cowshed. The emaciated dog was able to crawl under the anteroom, which was built a little higher. They were hard times both for humans and animals.

Trains passed through Kozulyka in both directions. If the train was very long, there would be two locomotives in front and one behind. Heavy armour was transported both east and west. If it was going east, then it was either for repairs or to the Japanese front. More than anything else, I was interested in machinery and I used to envy the locomotive drivers, their assistants and stokers. I would walk behind the assistants as they went along the rows of carriages, holding a hook in one hand and an oil can with a long spout in the other. They would open the little brake lids on the wagon axles, pour some oil on the thread and the rag packing inside, and using the hook, shut the lid with a loud noise. There was a sign in Russian saying «Matrosov brakes» on the chassis of freight trains, and one saying «Westinghouse brakes» on passenger trains. That way it was clear how the train was to be serviced. When the train was ready to continue its journey, the locomotive first reversed with a jolt to overcome inertia and release the brake pads from the wheels. A jerk forward followed. Again the coupling devices and buffers would clang along the entire length of the train. I gazed after the trains for a long time, especially at dusk when the three red lights on the last carriage disappeared into the distance. So there was another world besides the one I lived in. The art of starting a locomotive was a complete mystery to me. I had seen how a vehicle or a tractor was started, but not a locomotive. What kind of crank and how many men were needed? In those days I knew nothing about steam power, and there weren't any electric or diesel engines yet, at least not in Siberia.

My mother was worried about my future as well as her own, and went to the local commandant's headquarters to enquire about the possibility of returning home. The answer was no. On one occasion, however, a supervisor welcomed her fairly warmly, listened to her, thought it over and said in Russian as if to Mother, himself or someone else, «Well, I don't know. There is a demand for goods.» What he said was ambiguous. The word «towarischchi» means «comrades», whereas if you say «towar ischchi», the meaning is «there is a demand for goods». If Mother had had something valuable to use as a bribe, our fate could have been decided sooner. But she had long since bartered her valuables for clothing and food, so that talk about a demand for goods was of no use.

Winter passed slowly. Other Latvian women used to visit my mother. They would tell each other's fortune. On the table was a round piece of paper with letters, and the women «warmed the cup». Supposedly the cup moved on the paper beneath their fingers. They also gazed at a ring in a glass of water while sitting between two candles in front of a mirror. At moments like these the fortune-teller had to be alone, the others were in the landlady's room. One day Mother saw a man with a moustache, someone like my grandfather or even Stalin, and got such a fright that she never told fortunes with a glass again.

When I had no homework, I and the boys built snow castles in the landlady's garden, made wooden guns that rattled but didn't shoot, and played war games. After the «battles», wet and tired, we collected our «weapons» in the dark and went home. I also enjoyed carving things out of wood. Time passed quickly.

Spring in Siberia arrives later than in Latvia, but eventually it does. I don't think sleet and other common natural phenomena

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are as bad there. And yet something strange happened to me. One day my legs began to ache so terribly that I couldn't walk. I even screamed with the pain. The worst was in the groin. Mother got a horse and somehow managed to put me in the cart. The cart rattled and shook, and my legs hurt very much. All I could see above me was a pitch dark sky. A storm was approaching, and I was afraid that on top of everything else I would be soaked through. But we reached the hospital before the rain. I was carried into a ward and put into bed. The pain did not go away, but at least it wasn't worse. I was given some tablets, on which I nearly choked. I had never taken medicine before, and the bitter taste almost left me breathless.

Then a fearsome storm broke. Lightning flashed continually, thunder rolled incessantly, and an entire wall of water came down. And a miracle happened – the pain disappeared. I lounged around the hospital for a week or two. While there, I saw from my window an interesting means of transport go past – a kind of small boat on one wheel. A person was sitting in the boat. It appeared quickly and disappeared just as quickly. Well, I was completely baffled – how could one wheel carry a small boat with a person in it? It turned out to be only a motorcycle with a sidecar.

When I was discharged from hospital, my mother was told that I had rheumatism. Since then I have suffered from this old people's illness. Now and then for some unknown reason I have to limp. I don't need a barometer. I can forecast rain and especially a storm by the way my legs feel, and perhaps by other signs known only to me. I'm rarely wrong. Sometimes people laugh at me when I forecast rain in perfectly fine weather. But I observe spiders, the sky, dogs, birds, trees, insects and grass, and I can feel it in my bones.

With the onset of summer, school life receded into the past. I now spent my days in our vegetable garden, at the railway station and Mother's work, some kind of forestry office. Everything grew in the garden, including weeds, but getting rid of them was child's play. Potatoes, the Siberians' second most important food after bread, took up most of the garden. Hoeing them once was quite sufficient, for when they started to grow, weeds couldn't get through. No wonder Russian young women sang in their ditties, «Lieutenant, lieutenant, come visit me, I've got potatoes in my garden and my cow gives lots of milk.»

Potatoes, cabbage, cucumbers, onions, garlic and swedes, these made up the staple diet in Siberia in those days. The taiga was a good source of additional food. Using produce from her own garden and the gifts of the taiga, a capable housewife could prepare delicious meals, such as cabbage pie, jam or meat dumplings, bird-cherry pudding, jam, mushrooms, and casseroles and stews cooked in big Russian ovens. When the round cast-iron pot was pulled out with the aid of a hooked poker, a wonderful smell would fill the room. Russian housewives baked bread, too.

Over time, as I wandered around the small town, I got to know all the popular places. One was the pond at the edge of town, where the water was murky and the colour of clay, and was no match for the water in the Little Kemchooga River in Ribnoye. But we swam there anyway. We were all suntanned. If our mothers had got to work with soap and warm water, some of the tan would have disappeared, but they had no time.

In spring, when we started running around barefoot, the soles of our feet were not tough yet, and a sharp splinter, a piece of glass or a nail could easily stick into them. But by midsummer the soles had a thick layer of skin, which became chapped in

autumn, and nothing could hurt them. Only a Caucasian knife or an Indian's arrow could have pierced them, but there were no such things in Siberia.

The next most popular place was the veterinary centre. Domestic animals were treated here, mares and cows were mated, and stallions and young bulls castrated. I didn't like these procedures at all and avoided the place. I don't recall seeing a dog or a cat being treated there, and I was very fond of them.

When trains stopped at the station, passengers would spill out onto the platform and buy whatever the women were selling – milk, potatoes, cedar nuts, berries and vegetables. We boys regarded the travellers with awe. These people were going somewhere, they were above us, and I didn't approach them. Freight train passengers were a different matter. They were soldiers, jolly and carefree, or at least seemed to be. When the train stopped, they would jump off, run to get some water, buy something, play the accordion and sing and dance. Occasionally they even gave us something.

For quite a while a Kalmyk⁴ boy lived at the station. He had turned up from somewhere, wandered around the station and welcomed all military trains. He offered to sing and dance for the soldiers, receiving some food in return. He would sing «Katyusha»⁵, to which he had composed his own chorus. As he sang the chorus, he would swing his arms and legs, and that was supposed to be a dance. The soldiers used to feed him. When he was asked where he lived, he pointed to the ground and said, «Here». When

⁴ *Kalmyks* – an ethnic group of the Northern Caucasus, exiled by Stalin in 1943 on charges of collaboration with German forces.

⁵ «*Katyusha*» – a song composed during World War II and especially popular among Russian soldiers.

asked about his father and mother, he would shake his head – «No parents». He found shelter in some nook or shed, and survived on handouts. Just as he had appeared from nowhere, the little ragamuffin disappeared. He went to another station. In this way he spent the summer by the railroad, which provided him with shelter, transport and food. This kind of life as a homeless vagrant tempted me also, perhaps more the travelling by train than the lifestyle. As the train started to move, all you had to do was run beside the carriage with the guard's platform, hop up on the footboard, grab the rail and make yourself comfortable. I tried it once. It was lovely. The train picked up speed, telegraph poles and trees flashed by. Things closer to the railroad passed by faster, those further away just glided past. You saw all kinds of things, but the faster the train travelled, the colder you felt.

That time I ended up in a silly situation, in that the train sped through several stations without halting. Finally it stopped at one and I quickly found another train that could take me back. When it moved off, I again jumped on it and waited to be taken back to Kozulyka. I knew which one it was by keeping count of the stations. However, it turned out to be a through train. I had to get off before the train started travelling at full speed. So at one stage, when the train slowed down and I noticed that the semaphore hand was down, it was time to act. I got down on the lowest step and had enough time to glimpse the semaphore hand going up. I rolled down the grassy embankment like a ball, with great success, I might add. A slightly grazed thigh was nothing compared to the trouble I would have had if I had been taken some 100 kilometres in a westerly direction. After that I never went riding on trains again.

Towards the end of summer, one of the boys told us that the Kalmyk boy had been «cut up by a train». The little fellow had

perished in his accustomed surroundings, probably as he was either jumping on or off a train. It was not unusual for domestic animals also, mostly cows, to get run over by trains.

Mother was working in a timber-processing plant. I was interested in her work because there was paper around, on which I could write and draw. Whenever I got a decent sized piece, I tried to draw everything around me – people, houses, animals, but above all, machines. The plant had a large number of machines. There were cars and tractors, saws for felling trees and sawing logs, and other timber processing equipment. Staves for casks were also made there. Sometimes an order for these had to be filled quickly. Casual workers, including boys, were then employed. We used to work diligently and fast. We were paid when stacking was finished. On one occasion I earned 37 roubles in one day. I became aware of the power of money. You could get anything with money, and the more you had, the better.

I was a keen helper when cars and tractors were repaired. I enjoyed washing the parts and lining them up on a board, and I was proud when I was praised. A tractor driver once dropped the oil cap into a bucket of sump oil while he was changing the oil. Without hesitating, I put my hand into the bucket and fished out the cap. I was praised again. It's very likely that the adults had a good laugh behind my back about such diligence.

The vehicles were old, with broken panels, but they were strong. When I now reflect on how they were looked after, or rather neglected and abused, I have to pay tribute to both the GAZ-AA as well as the ZIS-5 trucks. They went from Gorky all the way to Berlin. New vehicles went to the front, the old ones were used in industry, and the same principle applied to people.

I and other lads loved going for rides, sometimes with the driver's permission, at other times without, and it didn't matter in

which direction. We obtained «classified» information from my mother in advance about a driver's destination. All we had to do was find the right moment when the driver got into his cabin. We were as agile as acrobats, and even before the driver had sat down, we were in the back of the truck.

People of various nationalities were in Siberia – Russians, Poles, Ukrainians, Byelorussians, Germans from the Volga region, Kalmyks and others, a veritable Tower of Babel. A young German man called Sasha Saibelis worked as a driver and was very friendly towards us. He asked us to clean his truck, looked after it well himself and occasionally entrusted us with a spanner. The benefit was mutual – his truck was kept in good condition and we had rides in it.

One afternoon Sasha was taking a girl along. We hopped in the back. Sasha warned us that we would be going far and he didn't know when we would return. Obviously our presence was not welcome at all. Unfortunately we refused to accept that without the aid of a stick. But Sasha was unwilling to use such draconian measures against his friends, so off we went.

The road took us across the taiga. The scenery was beautiful, a cloud of dust behind us, the wind whistling in our ears, an occasional insect in our eyes. In short, it was wonderful.

We had covered quite a distance. The road became worse. Finally the truck went into a rut. The engine roared, the wheels spun but the truck didn't budge. We brought twigs, branches and pine needles, we cut alders and put them under the wheels. We were on the brink of success when the engine cut out and the truck rolled back into the rut. Darkness was falling, and Sasha announced that he had run out of petrol.

Next, he advised us to go home, the girl in the cabin giggled. We took off and ran all the way home. Mother was worried. When

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I told her about our experiences, I noticed a smile in the corner of her mouth, but she just said, «You shouldn't have gone along this time.» Later it turned out that we had driven about 10 kilometres. The girl sitting in the driver's cabin had caused the truck to «stall» and «run out of petrol». The following morning everything was in order, Sasha and his truck were back at work and the young lady was presumably even jollier than before.

The war was over. This didn't affect me, for I had a fairly vague idea about war. Grandmother sent us some parcels. That was a dream – such beautiful clothes, boots, exercise books, drawing paper, pencils and paints, erasers! These erasers were as good as the ones I brought back from Czechoslovakia many years later.

The war was over. Fewer trains were transporting timber and manpower. There was joy as well as sorrow. Rumours were going around that we would be allowed to return home. But this was home, too. I didn't feel particularly eager to go, except perhaps for the feeling that everything in faraway Latvia was probably better. That was what I assumed from the parcels my grandmother was sending from Bauska.

Then one day my mother said to me, «We're getting up early tomorrow. Now wash yourself properly and go to bed.» When I was in bed, Mother sat down by me and said, «You're going to Latvia.» And she cried.

Early the next morning she took me to the station. The train pulled in and the carriage door directly in front of us opened. Mother lifted me up, a woman helped me, the door slammed shut and I couldn't see Mother any more. The next moment the train pulled out of the station. Later I found out that an organisation in Latvia had arranged to gather orphans together and take them by train back to Latvia. However, I wasn't orphaned. Apparently the

local Chekists rebuked my mother for secretly sending me away. She didn't tell me anything about going beforehand in case I told someone and this «criminal» operation failed.

At one stage on the train journey all we had for three days was bread and hot water. Obviously the grown-ups accompanying us couldn't get anything else. But I was happy.

The most difficult part was when we were quarantined in a building in Pārdaugava, a Rīga suburb. It may have been a children's hospital. Everything was new and unfamiliar to me – sleeping, washing, set meal times, electric light. The worst facility was the bathroom with its white bowls and sinks. You weren't allowed to stand on the toilet bowl, and when you pulled the bright chain attached to the cistern above the bowl, water gushed out with a loud noise. I didn't like that one bit.

After the quarantine, my grandmother arrived and took me to Bauska. About a week later I had to go to the Bauska seven-grade school, where I was put into second grade because of my «excellent» Latvian. So I spent two years in second grade, one in Kozulyka, where the language of instruction was Russian, the other in Bauska, where we were taught in Latvian. I didn't have to learn Russian any more in any educational institution.

I had other temporary problems. I was called different names, including «convict». In those days the children of Red Army soldiers were enormously privileged, and they received presents on state holidays. I would also have liked to receive a present, but I was a «convict». Grandmother consoled me when I complained that other children had this or that and I didn't have anything. She would say, «Don't worry, the day will come when we will celebrate in our street, too.»

Because I was rebellious by nature and defended myself with fists, I was often beaten up, too. But what hurt most was the fact

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that the teachers punished me without trying to ascertain who was guilty.

One day at school, a classmate called Beķeris was absent. That was March 1949. I was spared that time, but Mother wasn't.

I arrived in Latvia in August 1946, but my mother escaped from Siberia in April 1947. Literally escaped. Without a passport, in the clothes commonly worn in Siberia, with only small change in her pocket, which she spent on the fare from Kozulyka to Moscow. Only she knows how she managed to get from Moscow to Rīga. For a while she was in hiding in Rīga, then started living with us, Grandmother and me, that is, in Bauska. (Elga and Egils were meanwhile living with their mother.) Mother got a job as a teacher in the same school where I was acquiring worldly wisdom. In letter after letter she petitioned the Council of Ministers, the Minister for Internal Affairs and various others for a passport, but to no avail. They were worthy successors to the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs⁶. Some replied to Mother's request, others didn't. Would it have been better if we had pleaded ignorance and had just carried on, or if we hadn't lived in Bauska, where everyone knew each other by sight? The inhabitants knew the local authorities and every militiaman. Some of them were so dedicated that they knew every soul in this tiny town. It wasn't Stalin who gave the order to arrest my mother in 1949. Rather it would have been the work of a collaborator, minor or otherwise. Mother was arrested at school, and her long, hard journey began all over again. First she was in prison in Jelgava, then the transit prison in Rīga, after that in the north in the Murmansk district on

⁶ *People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs* – the NKVD, i.e. Soviet Secret Police, 1934–1943. It was known as the MGB, the Ministry of State Security, 1946–1953. After 1953, state security was handled by the KGB (State Security Committee).

the Kola Peninsula. Finally, after three years, she was working in the very same place she had left in 1947. And so the first cycle, which began in June 1941, ended in Bauska in April 1947, and the second ended five years later in 1952.

When Mother was deported again, I was 12 years old. I was tough and strong, and didn't snivel but did whatever Grandmother wanted, although I thoroughly disliked the never-ending gardening. In early spring we started heating the greenhouse and growing seedlings. Thinning out, watering, shifting boxes of seedlings, covering the greenhouse, getting up at night to stoke up the heater, I hated all these tasks. In spring, however, when we could earn ten thousand roubles at the market in one day, all the troubles were forgotten. It was, after all, our only source of income. Even so, I didn't like sitting at the market. Teachers and my classmates' parents shopped there, and I was embarrassed. I don't like selling to this day.

My grandmother had to allocate the money earned at the market for taxes, firewood, home repairs, clothing and food for the whole year. All these were our living expenses. In addition, we had to send parcels to Mother. I dreamed of having a bicycle, but Grandmother said no. I was angry that time, but now I understand and feel annoyed when ten-year-olds muck around on mopeds. I cobbled together my own bicycle by collecting a great many useful as well as less useful bicycle parts from attics, basements, debris and rubbish tips.

My godfather was a wonderful person. Following my godmother's orders, he gave me tyres for my bicycle. It was admirable generosity on their part, and for me it was an absolutely fabulous gift. They were living with us, having moved from the country because they didn't want to join a kolkhoz. I made my bicycle by

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using my godfather's as a model, and that was my means of transport for nine years until it was stolen at work.

Life at school went on as usual. I had to study mathematics, grammar, German (how awful, having to learn the enemy's language!), geography, physics, chemistry and many other subjects. In literature we even had to read a story by Vilis Lācis⁷ about a family's travels east. What a fantastic journey that was! How the family was welcomed there! How quickly they mastered socialism without ever studying feudalism and capitalism! At least that was what our teacher told us. It literally made me sick, but I had orders to keep quiet, otherwise I might have to repeat my journey. I expressed my opposition in other ways: I did the naughtiest things, behaved in a disruptive fashion and didn't study what I disliked. I would swot up at the end of a semester or just before examinations. Despite this, I completed primary school without bad marks. For a long time my acts of sabotage were not uncovered. How did a stinking frog get under the headmaster's rostrum in the school assembly hall? How could the knob fall off the classroom door? Why did the ink in the inkpots froth? One day when I offered the information myself, that it could be done with carbide, I was seriously warned that I would get the boot, told that no wonder I had been in a labour camp, and that I would have to be handed over to the Cheka again. I got an awful fright and got my bicycle ready in case I had to escape. On that occasion there was no need. Nevertheless I came to the conclusion that I had to hold my tongue even in the presence of my best friend, and consider carefully whether it was advisable to give my opinion.

⁷ *Vilis Lācis (1904–1966)* – a Latvian Communist writer who held positions of power following Latvia's occupation by the USSR in June 1940.

One teacher turned a blind eye to my mischievous behaviour. He made me sing a lot and frequently asked me to answer questions in literature lessons. I had good marks, for I was a fast learner, and out of respect for him often tried to do the homework he set. We met when I was over 20 years old, and once more when I was about 40. I hardly recognised the cheerful, vital, musical, humorous and energetic Ziedonis Purvs. We exchanged a few words in the city rush and went our separate ways.

I completed primary school in 1952 and started high school in Bauska. What an institution that was! On 1 September the headmaster and the teacher in charge of administration welcomed us to the school, and at the end of the speech said, «Let's go forward, to a victory for Communism, under Lenin's banner with Stalin leading us!» What did our entry into high school have to do with a banner? Well, it must have, seeing that the administration said so.

Terrible confusion and bewilderment arose at school on 5 March, 1953. After everyone had been herded into the assembly hall and the announcement made about the great loss that Stalin had brought upon the nation through his thoughtless death, the teacher-administrator was wiping her eyes with a handkerchief amid stifled sobs. Jānis P., who was standing beside me, whispered, «I feel as if a piece of s--- has dropped from my a---.» To stop myself from howling with laughter, I had to bite my tongue so hard that tears came to my eyes. The memorial assembly ended with a speech urging us students to study even harder and grow up to be genuine followers of Stalin, honouring in this way the death of our leader. I believe this scene was repeated all over the country, and many grieved just as much as our teachers who, it was said, had an onion in their handkerchiefs. Looking back on it now, it seems that the words didn't fall on deaf ears, and some students did grow up to become loyal Stalinists.

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On reaching adulthood, all Soviet citizens are issued with a passport. But in my case that caused some confusion. In Siberia no-one had understood why my surname was not the same as my mother's, so I completed primary school under her surname. But my real name had to be on the passport, which I had to get while still in high school. In those uncertain times, people were afraid of everything. My mother and grandmother were worried and decided that Grandmother should adopt me. So when I received my passport, it was in the name of Šnore. Now, surely, I wouldn't be deported again, for I was a different person and the brother of my «sinful» mother. Was that a naive belief? Of course.

My mother was pardoned in 1956 when I was nineteen.

1988

I was born on 24 May last day of the year 1939, the fourth child of the Šnors family who lived in eastern Volynia. I was destined to live here. In the home my father built on the banks of the Zolota stream, only until 23 about 1939, that is, for the first ten years of my life, a happily short time. On that March morning a long journey into the war world began from this house. First I was sent to Łowicz where I stayed in Catholic convents. My mother had arranged certain wages for me as the labourer's son. I spent the night on the floor in a barracks. I was sent to work up in the River Dniestr under a new name. After the war the journey to my mother began on the river that led me to the town of Kovel in Ukraine.

I was sent to work in a factory in the town of Kovel. I was there until 1946 and then I went to Moscow where I finished my studies in the Faculty of Economics of the Moscow State University. I was then sent to work in the town of Kovel.

SERENITY

Elvīra Sebre

I had a dream that night. A long cortege of grey horse-drawn carriages was taking my grandmother's coffin to the cemetery on the hill.

The next morning a procession just like that took us into banishment, away from our weeping grandmother. We never saw her again.

I was born on the very last day of the year 1938, the fourth child of the Sebris family who lived in eastern Vidzeme. I was destined to live here, in the home my father built on the banks of the Zellene stream, only until 25 March, 1949, that is, for the first ten years of my life, a pitifully short time. On that March morning a long journey into the wide world began from this house, first under guard in horse-drawn carriages to Gulbene railway station, then in locked cattle wagons as far as the labour camps in Tomsk, where we spent the night on the floor in a barrack, waiting for the ice to break up in the River Ob and make it navigable. After that came the journey on an open barge on the river that looked like the sea, it was so flooded.

It was early May. It was raining and snowing at the same time. My brother Jānis (born in 1932) and Mother were sitting beside me, desperately trying to keep me warm, for I was ill and had

given up. But as Mother told me later, she had prayed that I would live at least until we reached the shore, so that they wouldn't have to throw my body overboard into the terrifying floodwaters of the Ob. She couldn't have endured that. The barge stopped at Parabel, the regional centre, where we spent several days. I remember that I couldn't walk, that my mother carried me on her back, and that people were swarming towards an open gate to find some warmth and shelter in a community hall. But there was not enough room for everyone. I recall sitting under a window of a house, squeezed in among bundles of belongings.

The journey continued another 150 kilometres down the River Parabel as far as Tarsk. Ox carts had arrived from the kolkhoz to take us further into the taiga, about 30 kilometres from the river. Later I would travel this road on foot on numerous occasions, both in summer when a cloud of insects enveloped me, and in the chill Arctic winter. The first time was to be four years later when I returned to Tarsk to sit for the grade four examination.

Every ten kilometres, like milestones, were villages built by the Russians who were deported in 1929. The first one was called Mohovoye, the next Parkayevo and then came Borovoye, the final destination of my childhood journey. May was drawing to a close and the trees in the taiga were in bud. A profusion of flowers and bushes we hadn't seen before were in bloom. Further on there were no more villages, Borovoye being the last. The road which ox carts could use in summer also ended here. Only animal or hunters' tracks led deeper into the taiga. A group of people who, as we found out later, were Old Ritualists, lived in a village across the Charusa River. We children often went there. These people hadn't joined collective farms, but were trappers. They also raised cattle and grew those crops which were suitable for this climate and which they needed to survive. They were very clean and reli-

gious, as were the Russian exiles. Generally only men, the hunters, had contact with the outside world. That was in winter, when they travelled on wide skis to sell their furs, and returned with salt, matches and a garment or two, mostly thick padded jackets.

When the ox-drawn carts approached our destination, the village of Borovoye, some people who were clearing the forest nearby came to meet us. I vividly remember one woman among them. She was middle-aged but looked older, with a wrinkled face and wearing garments made of sacking. It was Mrs Pavasars, who was deported in 1941. There were only two Latvian women in the village. The other one was Mrs Obulders. They shared a hut, and that was where we were also housed – my mother, brother and I. The other Latvians were placed with Russian families.

Mrs Obulders also came from Rīga. Her son Harald was in sixth grade at a school in Novikova, 50 kilometres away. When the war ended, her daughter was sent back to Rīga. Mrs Pavasars was alone, her husband was in a forced-labour camp, but she was looking forward to a reunion with him, she believed in the miracle of survival. She was in fact reunited with her husband in 1954 or 1955. He had been an excellent pastrycook in pre-war Rīga and they had owned a property there. We children used to listen to these stories as we lay on the Russian-style ovens. The women lit the fire in the morning, sat in front of it performing some task in the firelight and reminisced about life at home.

I remember also the general layout of the village. Small huts with turf-covered roofs lined both sides of what



A padded jacket.

could be called a street. There was only one room in each hut. In the middle of the village were the kolkhoz office, a water well (just one for the whole village) and a small schoolhouse with four classrooms. In winter we melted snow for water. Then came the bull farm and a barn, and further on the cemetery. Beyond that the village separated into two, each with a muddy road. A small stream flowed through the village.

The hut in which we lived with the Latvian women was the first on the right-hand side as you came in from Parkayeva. The last house at the other end of the village belonged to the kolkhoz administrator. His house was somewhat «grand». His father, one of the oldest villagers, recounted how the people who were deported at the beginning of collectivisation in 1929 were left in the uninhabited taiga without any help or support. Using axes to fell cedar trees and dragging logs on their backs, these unfortunate folk had built all the huts in the villages. To bury their dead, they had been able, with everyone helping, to dig only one large pit, which they covered when it was full. And then they would dig another one. This cemetery was located elsewhere, some distance from the village on the way to the Charusa River. A threshing barn, just a simple lean-to, was set up near the river, as was a barn for sheep and pigs.

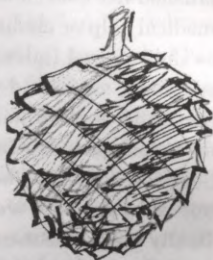
It was our first spring in a Siberian village. Mother and the other Latvians had to clear forests by uprooting trees. The children stayed at home and did some chores, mostly collecting firewood. There was a forest all around the village. We dragged trees, branches and all, from there. There were many dead trees in the taiga, dry but still supported by their roots even after forest fires that usually raged all summer long.

By spring the Russian families had no food to sell. We had long since run out of whatever we had managed to find at home and take

with us in that fearful haste. I recall that in our home that morning the bread dough was still rising, and we didn't have any bread to take with us. Mother sent me to the next-door neighbour to ask her for a loaf. She had just baked some the day before, and she put into my bag as many loaves as I, a mere child, could carry.

We had to think about the next winter, so, in order to buy a small bucketful of potatoes or even the peelings, Mother gave away first her coat and fur coat, then her watch and wedding ring.

In spring the taiga turned as green as a meadow with kolba, plants that smelt and tasted like garlic. These plants proved to be our main food. Finely chopped and mixed with salt, they were tasty and were probably a good source of vitamins. We also boiled them in water. The children used to gather them. In summer they bloomed and became tough. Next, the goose-feet plant was ready for picking. In 1949 there happened to be a good crop of cedar cones. We brought bags full of them from the taiga and roasted them in the fire. The sap would run out, and then it was easy to shell the small reddish seeds, which tasted wonderful. The local inhabitants, who knew how to use them and the best places to get them, would gather enough to last several years. There was a good crop every four years. The nuts were stored in bags in a dry place, usually on top of the stove.



A cedar cone.



Cedar nuts.

The Lapsa family lived with a Russian family in the hut next door. Their daughter was my friend. We were the same age and had met in the 54th train carriage on our way here. In the second or third summer in Borovoye she had an accident. She fell and crushed her knee, and this resulted in an infection. Without any medical help or medication, the girl's parents watched helplessly as she suffered indescribable pain all summer. When the injury subsided, she could no longer straighten her leg at the knee. I remember how in winter the children would pull her to school on a sled, carry her into the classroom, and after the lessons take her back home. We both completed fourth grade, but afterwards our ways parted. I went to school in Novikova, while Antra was finally given treatment.

In the first spring we children understood only a few words in Russian. The Russian children were eager to play with us, but we were stand-offish, almost hostile. Sometimes we even organised fights, with Russian boys on one side of the fence and Latvian children on the other. Our weapons were sticks and stones. Antra and I always stuck together.

We used to go to the summer pastures across the Charusa River, where for a day's work we got a litre of buttermilk, or sometimes 100-200 grams of butter sediment. In summer all the milk was processed into butter and handed over to the government as a levy. The milk, about two or three litres a day, came from the kolkhoz as well as privately owned cows. (The Latvians didn't have any cows.) When the butter was melted, some sediment settled on the bottom. This was then spooned out for the workers as payment. In winter the milk was allowed to freeze in bowls, and these frozen milk rounds were taken in bags to government collection points. The state followed the same procedure in obtaining milk from



A bird-cherry tree.

privately owned cows. Cranberries and sauerkraut, the latter fermented whole or separated into leaves, were also frozen.

In the first spring in the taiga, we buried a Latvian boy whose first name I don't recall, but his surname was Mālkalns. For me this was a close look at death, although in the forced-labour camp in Tomsk children had had ample opportunity to see the most brutal violence and its consequences. In a lean-to in the camp yard

I had seen many corpses. People had lain in mud, suffering from dysentery that had broken out in the spring thaw.

When summer came, peonies bloomed in big, beautiful clusters in the wild around Borovoye. There were a lot of spiraea plants, as well as plants that resembled tiger lilies. Their tubers were edible. A plant with a hollow stem, which was also edible, grew on the river banks. There was also in the taiga meadows a plant that was probably poisonous, because cattle ate only the grass around it. Wild strawberries were in flower, as were several other plants which are not known in Latvia. A type of grass that grows in the taiga was used instead of a rag to wash floors. It was plucked in autumn and lasted all year. Bird-cherry



Bird-cherries.



A cedar tree.

trees, whose berries were all eaten, grew along river banks, as did black currants and an occasional red currant bush. Countless branches of these bushes were broken off and carried home on our backs over the spring crust of snow. The buds were picked off, dried and sold for a meagre sum. Nobody considered how destructive that was.

Nature provided us with food in summer. When autumn came, there were mushrooms in the forests, which the local people preserved in barrels in salt, but without first boiling them. A kind of berry, which could have been the cloudberry, grew in the swamps. I remember it being very dark red and as sweet as a lolly.

The king of trees in Siberia is the cedar. The birch, aspen, spruce and pine also grow there.

A new teacher arrived in the village at the end of August. That was an event. The young woman had to stay the whole long winter and teach all four classes.

The Russian boys were already attending school and on their way home would greet us. One evening as we were returning home from getting our litre of buttermilk, we saw the new teacher talking to our mothers in front of our hut. She said we, too, had to start school, which had begun two weeks ago. Text and exercise books would be free.

So the following day Antra's mother took me and Antra to the little village school, where the teacher and the Russian children

welcomed us. All the pupils sat in one room. Antra and I sat at the back. This was the first grade, but in Latvia I had already been in third grade. We found speaking Russian a bit difficult, and writing wasn't easy, either. We were taught to write numbers in a different way also. For quite a while I couldn't master the use of the soft and hard letter «i». It wasn't long before the teacher separated Antra and me so that we wouldn't speak Latvian during lessons. Now we sat next to a couple of Russian boys. Russian boys were curiously dressed – their shirts were not tucked into the trousers, but worn over them and tied with a belt. We had gymnastics at school also.

The most important festival was on 7 November. The entire village celebrated it in the «red corner» of the kolkhoz office. The Latvian women also helped with the preparation of food. An animal was slaughtered and some flour was issued. A thick, fatty soup with home-made macaroni was made in large cauldrons. The women prepared all that the night before. Everyone could eat as much as they wanted, once a year for free, and there was dancing and singing.

The next festival was Christmas, celebrated by the Latvians. The children didn't go to school, but neither the teacher nor our classmates criticised us. In the middle of the hut we had a Christmas tree without candles but trimmed with paper decorations. The adults sang songs, and the children took turns to recite poems, five or six each, that our mothers had taught us from memory. Then came carols such as «Silent night, holy night» and, without fail, a well-loved song which expressed our longing for our homeland.

The following Christmas, when we were already living in our own hut, my mother and I were invited to Mrs Pavasars' place. I can

still see in my mind's eye Mother baking «bacon buns», if that is what they could be called. In return for days worked, a couple of kilograms of dark flour were handed out. We boiled a thin gruel from it to make it last till the next issue. But on this occasion Mother kneaded it into a thick dough. She had a small handful of chopped bacon that had been sent from home. Into each of the buns she put a smidgin of bacon to give them some semblance of taste and make as many buns as possible. Mrs Pavasars welcomed us with exceptionally tasty bacon buns – hers were made from white flour. I was heartbroken that time because of the ones we had brought.

Russians celebrated their Christmas at the beginning of January. In the early, very cold winter morning (the temperature in this region often dropped to -50°C), Antra and I visited many Russian families, wished them a merry Christmas in Russian and sang a couple of Christmas carols in Latvian. As a thank-you we received a few buns with carrot, cabbage or cranberry fillings. If the buns hadn't been baked yet that morning, the lady of the house brought them to us during the day and said how much she had enjoyed the Latvian carols. The only one we didn't visit was the woman whose son, according to the locals, was working for the KGB in Moscow.

The following year, when we were in second grade and knew all the villagers, we didn't pay this Yuletide visit. Nevertheless all those whom we had visited, remembered us at Christmas and brought some tasty morsel, saying how sorry they were that we hadn't remembered them.

Another one of my recollections is the first New Year's Day in the little school in Borovoye. We coloured in the pages of exercise books and cut out toys, and with these trimmed a tree (we had no candles). When the mothers arrived, we recited the poems we'd learnt, and a teacher presented us with cotton socks and a

small bag of round lollies for proficiency in schoolwork. The lollies were red on one side and white on the other, and they were the first payment I earned myself in faraway Siberia. I'm sorry that I can't recall the teacher's surname. She was very considerate towards us Latvian children. She learnt many Latvian words from us. A Russian boy, who made friends with Arturs Žīgurs, learnt Latvian perfectly within a short time. The teacher would frequently ask us to stay after school and help copy something or prepare some simple visual teaching aid, and she never forgot to give us something to eat, for she was well aware of our living conditions. She obtained her groceries free from the village shop, whereas we couldn't even get a kilo of flour there.

I don't remember my mother ever receiving any other payment for her labour in the kolkhoz, apart from the couple of kilos of coarsely ground flour, in grams per day. Later, in the spring of 1953, we received some bread also from the kolkhoz storehouse. In winter my brother and other Latvians, mostly young men, were sent to work in the forests, about 30 kilometres further into the taiga, to the so-called Omelych on the banks of the Omelych River. Drivers of ox carts, who delivered hay for the oxen and horses that were used there, provided the only means of communication. On several occasions my brother sent us a square loaf of bread of which he had deprived himself. This bread was so tasty! At that stage my brother was nearly twenty and of slight build. We wondered how he was surviving the hard labour in the forest.

I remember the severe cold at the beginning of one winter when the forest workers were allowed to go home for the October Revolution Day. Night fell, and we stood at the door of the hut and waited. This scene was repeated in every Latvian hut. The men came on foot. The cold cut you to the bone. They all arrived,

but with badly frost-bitten feet and faces. I remember how we took off my brother's bast shoes, which had frozen to his feet, and rubbed his toes until they warmed up a little. Later in life they became ulcerated and were very sensitive.

In this region, the Narima, the temperature often fell to -50°C . The region was a long-established convict settlement, to which Stalin had also been sent. In summer, on the other hand, midges would literally sting you to death.

Everyone who lived here had been deported at some time. Although the Russians were supposed to have been freed, most of them stayed. They had their own families, their children were born here. There were quite a lot of deported Germans who, like the Latvians, were under strict military supervision. In practice it worked like this: every few days we were registered. Leaving the confines of the village without permission was forbidden. The nearest post office was in Tarsk, 30 kilometres away. Letters from home or a note that a parcel had arrived were brought by the employees of the Machine and Tractor Station, accounts clerks who once a week would walk through the villages and via Tarsk to Staritsa, thus covering a distance of 60 kilometres. The nearest hospital was in Novikova, 50 kilometres away.

Deportees looked after livestock – cows, oxen, sheep, pigs and horses. They cleared the taiga to establish fields. Oxen were used to cultivate fields. How those poor animals were beaten and their tails twisted, even a fire would be lit under them to get them up again when they lay down! Shovels and hoes were used to plant, weed and lift potatoes, for example. In the final few years the first tractors appeared. Cereal grains, linen and peas were sown, and two varieties of potatoes were grown. Potatoes grew here provided there was no frost in June. But if the tops got frost on

them, then in autumn the tubers were no bigger than peas, and as a result there was famine in winter. In the first few years, cereal crops and hay were mown with sickles and scythes. If you owned a cow, you harnessed it to a plough, or used it to bring brushwood from the forest. The local Russians were not familiar with tools such as the scythe held in one hand or the wooden plough. Some Latvians who knew how to make them, used them. Eventually the first harvester appeared.

In summer I used to tend cows in the taiga, sheep in the meadows at the edge of the forest, and pigs in fields after the grain had been harvested. I've seen the taiga bear grazing in the oat field, but mostly its prints or the destruction left behind. In autumn as I tended my animals, I often saw flocks of grouse in the fields. In winter the partridge and the robin would nest near the village. There were many black grouse in the taiga. In spring we'd hear the cuckoo. If it was calling near the hut or on the roof, it meant bad luck. There were no swallows or larks in these parts.

Not all the Russians had a cow or a pig. The Latvians, albeit not all of them, raised only pigs. All day long, piglets with yokes around their necks to prevent them from getting into potato fields, would wander in the village streets and wallow in the mud there, but in the evenings they would go back to the gate of their owner's home. They were fed on grass and potato peelings.

The children who had grown up here had never seen an apple tree or tasted an apple, so they were amazed to hear us talk about them. The peas growing in the kolkhoz fields attracted everyone's attention. It was tempting to pick just a few pods, but that was forbidden. No-one dared to enter the kolkhoz field. However, once in autumn, on her way home from work, Mother had put a handful of linseed into her pocket. What a feast! We roasted it in a dish, ground it and dipped potatoes in it.

There was one room in every hut and in each room, without exception, a Russian-style stove that took up half the space. An entire family could sleep on top of this stove. To keep it white, it was daubed with clay every other day. It was dusted and the ash in front of it was swept up with a dried hare's foot. The stove was lit once a day in the morning, and it maintained its heat until the following morning.

Meals were prepared in cast-iron pots and clay dishes, which were slid into the oven using special wooden forks with wooden handles. The meals the Latvian women learnt to cook under these conditions consisted of steamed turnips or potatoes. Dried and



A cast-iron pot.

ground bird-cherries were also eaten. When flour was issued, a thin gruel was cooked with water, or sometimes the flour was baked into knot-shaped «biscuits». Ground dried peas were also used. We had no bread for months on end. We survived on chipmunks boiled in

water. In early spring we'd lure them into snares by whistling in a certain way. These animals are smallish and belong to the badger family. We ate them when there was nothing else, when we got dropsy (oedema) from hunger and all we wanted to do was sleep.

I recall the winter of 1952/53 as being especially savage, and extremely cold and blizzardy towards spring. People said the devil himself was raging. My brother was working in forests far away, while Mother and I were living in the cold, dark hut. Mother would trudge through the awesome snow to the sheep

farm located on the banks of the Charusa, a considerable distance from the village. She had to fetch water for the sheep in buckets from holes cut in the frozen river. Around that time Mother was feeling very weak, but she still got up early every morning and went. She went because from the near-by pigsty she could bring in her pocket something to eat for dinner, even if it was only a couple of boiled potatoes. Every evening on returning from school, I would light the clay stove, and then I would stand at the gate looking at the Siberian snowstorm, waiting for my mother to appear, as if sensing that the worst kind of disaster



A chipmunk.

was about to happen, that soon I would have no-one to wait for. What did our mother think about in those moments of despair as she walked this fatal Way of the Cross? What thoughts occupied her concerning her children, how to save them, how to protect them? She wasn't physically strong enough. She was slightly built, a quiet, frail woman. And so she was defeated and in trying to save us, perished. That happened in the spring of 1953. I was in fourth grade and at the end of it you had to sit for an examination. All the pupils of Borovoye were told to go to Tarsk, 30 kilometres away, where a panel of teachers would examine us. I had already been preparing for the tests. In early spring, straight after school as well as on Sundays, I helped Mother tend sheep. Mother would often sit on the ground or a tree stump, as she no longer had the strength to spend all day on her feet, but knowing how risky it

was to sit on the still cold ground in spring, she forbade me to do likewise. Here, while tending sheep and out of sight of people, we would pick lice out of each other's hair and our shabby clothes.

Then the day for going to Tarsk arrived. I remember Mother seeing me off and putting a small bag containing a loaf of bread into the oxcart. Accommodation with Mrs Obulders, who had moved to Tarsk, had been arranged. I bade a tearful goodbye. My heart was aching inexplicably...

It was almost the end of May. All the children walked behind the oxcart, in which we had put whatever food we had. We were to spend one week in Tarsk. We did well in the examinations. After this success, we were in good spirits and set off on our walk back to Borovoye.

We had covered the first 10 kilometres. As we came to the Mohovoye village, Aina, who lived in our village with her mother and was the accounts clerk at the Machine and Tractor Station, came to meet us. She looked at me searchingly and called me aside. As if from a distance, I heard her telling me that my beloved mother had fallen ill, that she was being taken to hospital, and that I would meet her on the way, for they had to be here soon. As if sensing a dreadful tragedy, I started to cry inconsolably, left the other children on the road and ran as fast as I could through the village. Sure enough, right at the other end of the village on the taiga road was an oxcart, and in it on some straw lay my mother, gravely ill. She was being taken to the Novikova hospital. The means of transport had not been allocated for two days, and it took two days to reach the hospital, because an ox moves slowly and it's impossible to make it hurry. I went up to the cart and cried bitterly. I leaned over her. She stroked my hair. She put in my hand a tiny end of a loaf she had brought to eat on the way, and

told me to go home. She said my brother had returned from his work in the forest, and we were to try and get at least a few potatoes and plant them. The cart drove off and I was left all alone on the road. Then, in despair and sorrow and with a sense of foreboding, I began to run. I reached the village late at night. I still had someone, my brother, to return to in the hut. It was 28 May, 1953.

In the next couple of days we dug up the little plot of land next to the hut. My brother did this after work. He had obtained some potatoes somewhere for working in the forest. I cut them up into small pieces for planting and eating.

It was now 2 June. The soil had been prepared for planting, and I was sorting the cut-up potatoes into a bowl when my brother walked in. He leaned against the wall of the log cabin and began to cry loudly. I didn't have to ask, I understood. Someone had brought the news.

That night we both wept in our hut. A stage in our lives had ended, and we realised that from then on nobody would watch over us. How would we survive in this distant, hostile foreign land? Did we even think about that, I wonder. We were grieving for our mother. I was fourteen, my brother was twenty, and we didn't own anything. We were ragged and hungry, and we had no rights whatsoever, not even the right to life. Humiliated vagrants, we had nothing but our bare lives. Yet we survived, as we were probably destined to.

That day our mother's body was brought from the hospital. Mr Lapsa, Antra's father, worked in a small timber workshop, and from some offcuts he made something resembling a coffin. Out of a piece of white cloth and some sawdust we made a pillow and laid our beloved, gentle, long-suffering mother's head on it. She had died of some lung disease (tuberculosis?) at the age of

forty-six. We buried her in a foreign land at the edge of a cemetery in the mighty taiga. From that moment on we felt abandoned.

To get food, my brother and I worked in the kolkhoz all summer. I tended the cows and pigs, helped cut hay and make brooms, and weeded fields. My brother worked at the Machine and Tractor Station coupling tractors. When others were eating whatever they had brought for lunch, we hid in the bushes like puppies. We couldn't stay in the hut, from which we had carried Mother to the cemetery, we weren't able to sleep at night. My brother worked on night shifts, and on those occasions I would stand or crouch near the gate and not go inside. When the villagers saw that, they took pity on us and moved us to another hut. By that time some deportees were already leaving and huts became vacant.

We were constantly hungry. In spring we'd eat the inner bark of birch-trees. Hundreds of these trees growing on the fringe of the taiga died simply because their bark, all around and as high as a person could reach, was stripped off and the inner bark scraped off to the pulp and eaten.

It was autumn, 1953. My classmates were getting ready to continue their education in Novikova, where there was a seven-grade school. No-one bothered about me, a barefoot child (all summer long neither my brother nor I had any footwear). And suddenly it occurred to me, child though I was, that I should leave everything behind and go with the others, for I knew that when winter came, my brother would be sent to cut timber in the taiga and I would be left all alone. I gathered some potatoes, and my brother managed to persuade the brigade chief to pay him his wages – a couple of loaves of bread. With this treasure and barefoot, I set out with the other children, and perhaps that was what saved me. I did not miss out on an education and probably escaped death

from starvation. Later, people who had known us told me quite frankly that they had never believed we would survive.

On the last day of August, a warm day, I arrived in Novikova with the other children of our village. We enrolled at the school. We were told we could be boarded also, but not until the cold set in. We had to look for accommodation, but I didn't know anyone. The other children's parents had made some arrangements. At school I was told that many Latvian families were living in Novikova and that I should turn to them for help. Someone took me to one family, but they had already accepted children from somewhere else.

My pathetic appearance probably upset these people. In any case, having found out my surname and where I had come from (people in Novikova already knew that a Latvian woman had died in hospital in spring, leaving children behind), the local Latvians went into action, and from then on kept a watchful eye on me as best they could. I was taken to some very kind Latvians with the same surname as mine. They lived in a hut right at the edge of the village. A kindly-looking woman was sitting on a stool in front of the hut. It was Mrs Sebris from the homestead that was located right on the banks of the Gauja River in Latvia. The owner was not destined to ever see it again, for the cruel system broke her good honest heart, too. Her final resting place is in the Novikova cemetery. To my question whether they could take me in for a while, she smiled warmly and answered calmly that this could be settled when her sister, who made all the decisions here, came home from work. She asked me to come back later in the evening. I went back to school with a ray of hope.

It wasn't long before Antonija Sebre came to fetch me. The news had already spread in the village and had reached Aunt (as

I later called her) Antonija's workplace. They helped me as much as they could.

I used to walk to school the whole length of the Novikova village. On my way, as children often do, I'd daydream about all sorts of things, frequently very happy ones, for I lived in a world of make-believe. Every day, for instance, I imagined what I had on, what kind of dress or skirt and blouse I was wearing. A whole world, an entire wardrobe existed in my imagination. And I pictured myself as beautiful. It was all because I was shabbily dressed, but in my adolescent's subconscious I wished to be beautiful not only as a human being, but in appearance as well.

Potato harvesting time came. Aunt Antonija took me to the kolkhoz field, where the potatoes had just been lifted. She had obtained permission from the brigade leader for me, an orphan, to gather a small amount of potatoes for the winter. And so every evening after school, I went to the field and collected the tiny left-over potatoes and put as many into my small bag as I could carry on my back. In this way I stocked up for winter. On one occasion, as I was walking past the kolkhoz cattle barn, a woman hurried out, took my bag without saying a word, emptied it and from a heap of potatoes meant for cattle, put some large ones in instead. Who was this woman? Why did she do it?

On autumn Sundays Aunt Antonija would take me along to working bees. It was potato harvesting time. She did this so that I got paid, her share as well, and got a meal also. And so it happened that everyone gave me something, a pair of woollen socks, gloves, sometimes a slice of meat. Also we both picked mushrooms and cranberries.

Winter was approaching and I had put away a minimal supply of food. However, I was still barefoot and wearing a thin, shrun-

ken skirt. Then with the help of a Latvian, my mother's worn coat was brought from Borovoye. After unpicking and turning it inside out, a winter coat was made. The cloth of an unpicked bedding sack was used as lining. I was now the proud owner of a coat. Next, Aunt Antonija made me a pair of bast shoes.

Winter came, the boarding house was open, and again Aunt Antonija took me there. No meals were provided, but in one room there was a large stove, on which the children prepared their food. Mostly we boiled potatoes in our own little pots. We ate them with salt or bread, if there was any. I used to eat all the crusts and ends of loaves, even the dry or mouldy ones that someone had left over at the end of the week.

The supervisor of the boarding school was a Latvian, a lady from Rīga who had been deported in 1941. She was always neatly dressed and dignified, and her hair was plaited and arranged in a coronet on her head. She wore a hat. Her name was Monika, but I don't remember her surname. During those years there were also barracks in the Novikova school grounds, which were used as a children's home. Who were the occupants, I wondered. Where did these children come from? We all attended the same school and got on well with each other. In the morning after breakfast I would often find a slice of bread or a lump of sugar that these children had put on my desk. Why? Who encouraged them to do so? Then one day it was suggested that I, too, should go to the children's home. I would then be a ward of the state, I'd be fed and clothed like the others and no longer cold in winter. I don't know and I can't explain what prompted me or what gave me the wisdom and strength to flatly refuse this offer and continue to live on other people's charity. Once before I had put up the same fierce resistance when the order came for the whole primary school class

to join the Pioneers¹ in preparation for the October Revolution Day. All the children were silent, including me. The class was made to stand in a line while the teacher tied on red scarves. As she approached the end of the line and there was only one pupil before me, I ran out of the classroom, went home and told my mother. That evening the teacher visited Mother and they had a talk. At my mother's request, I allowed the scarf to be tied on the next morning, for otherwise there would probably have been trouble.

The Novikova school was preparing to mark October Revolution Day. Because of the continuing sub-zero temperatures, I was visiting the Sebris aunts only once a week. I didn't have felt boots. Then one evening I found out that I would receive a present the next day. I even woke up during the night thinking about it. The following day the pupils were assembled in the largest room of the school, the so-called hall, and the principal presented me



Felt boots.

with the most valuable gift in those days, a pair of felt boots, which had been bought with money donated by the teachers. All the Latvian women who worked at the school had participated. They all wept. I put on the boots and after school ran as fast as my legs would carry me to my kind aunts. Later they often recounted how the door of the hut had burst open and how I, out of breath, had dropped to the floor and raised both legs in the air so that they

¹ *Pioneers* – The Soviet youth movement was organised in three stages: the Octobrists, for the younger children; the Pioneers, for children between the ages of ten and fifteen; and the Komsomol, for young people between fifteen and twenty-seven.

could see my good fortune. They had understood without a word being spoken. I had been saved from the cold and was now an equal among the other children. Until then I'd had nothing better than woven rope shoes.

Around that time Mrs Pavasars moved from Borovoye to Novikova. There at long last the day she had yearned for arrived – her husband returned from the prison camps. Mr Pavasars began working at the bakery that was established in the former children's barrack. I often visited them there. For the first time in my life I watched a «*pyannik*» being made. The couple never forgot to feed me, and on innumerable occasions I'd find these biscuits or a small parcel of bread under my pillow in the boarding school. Oh, kind-hearted people, how I regret that I will forever be indebted to you! By the time I had the first opportunity ever in my life to at least partly repay you, you had passed away. Would it have been possible anyway?

In the spring school holidays, with Aunt Antonija's blessing, I was all set to go on a long trip – to visit my brother in the distant taiga, where he was working in the forest. Hay was taken from Novikova, so I was lifted up onto the cart, to spend several days and nights travelling. I was the driver.

During the New Year vacation all the children went back to their villages. I stayed at the boarding school because I had nowhere to go. On the last evening of the vacation the children returned one after another. When I entered my room, I found a small wooden box, wrapped and addressed to me. I can't describe my surprise. Was it really for me? On opening the box, I found untold wealth – various items of clothing and food, and a letter. Mrs Biķis had sent me all that from the village of Skirnyevska, where many Latvian children came from. During the holidays they had

talked about school, and had also mentioned the orphan who had stayed behind all alone in the school boarding house. Mrs Biķis had assembled the parcel and the children had carried it all the way back. I also got an invitation to visit their village. The following Sunday, my heart beating with joy, I set off with the other Latvian children to visit the village, where I met numerous kind people and Mrs Biķis, who helped me a great deal from then on. She lived alone.

In spring we all returned to our villages. During summer, until school started, I tended the kolkhoz cattle and returned to Novikova in autumn. The children's home had meanwhile been transferred.

Our class teacher, if I'm not mistaken, was Anna Fyodorovna, a timid woman, kind towards the Latvian children. Mr Obraztsov, the principal, taught physics, mathematics and history. He expected good results, but was fair. When he called you out to the front of the class, he didn't ask many questions, but just listened. If the answer was satisfactory, he would say, «Excellent, sit down.» During recess, pupils left their classrooms and walked around in a larger room. I remember an inscription above one door, the contents of which I knew off by heart for many years, it had become so imprinted on my mind. I can only partly recall it now. The main idea was one's yearning and quest for knowledge, «to climb ever upwards on rocky paths». Perhaps it was an insignificant detail, but in those days it seemed so meaningful, that each of us could relate to it. We had to strive for knowledge and do our utmost, at whatever cost, disregarding hunger, cold and suffering.

One afternoon in November, 1954, Aunt Antonija brought me news that I had been freed and could return to my homeland. This type of release was only for the lucky ones who were under sixteen years of age. I was turning sixteen in a month and a half.

Had my child's prayer really been answered? I prayed in bed every morning and night. It gave me peace and hope. However, I could no longer leave because river transport had already ceased. A great deal of money was needed for the journey, so we calmed down and waited for spring. I wrote a letter to my eldest brother, Elmārs, in Latvia and asked him to help me as much as possible. Elmārs hadn't been at home on the day we were deported. At that time he was twenty-one years old and working in Ranka. When the powerful and omnipotent of this world arrived at our home that morning, they informed Mother that her eldest son would also be going with us and that he was already waiting near the train. Mother packed his clothes, too. Yet we weren't able to find him either near the carriage or anywhere else later. It was only when we had reached our destination and permission had been given to let people in Latvia know where we were, that Mother wrote to our relatives back home. In this way we found out that Elmārs was safe and sound, thank God. He had been left standing, as it were, without a home, without his family, with no clothes or anything else, but at least in his homeland. Apparently his saviour had been Mr Lapiņš, the decent manager at his workplace, who, on learning the surnames of the young men who were to be deported to Siberia, had sent them off in good time on assignments to remote places. This man had been quick to guess correctly that the perpetrators of such a hurried and unjust deed would not have time to bother with details. Thanks to this slackness on the part of the persecutors, my brother's fate was to remain in his motherland. A young man without experience, he too had a very difficult time. The fear and humiliation that followed and plagued him for many years, damaged his health. We, on the other hand, had someone who sent us letters.

And so towards spring my brother, together with his god-mother (my father's sister) and godfather sent me the money for the journey. I was in seventh heaven! Even schoolwork no longer interested me.

Finally cutters and barges started travelling on the Parabel River. Aunt Antonija took me to the commandant to confirm my departure. I sensed a great indifference here towards this matter and a clumsy attempt to persuade me to stay in Siberia because I was now sixteen, after all. But I knew I was free and there was only one thing to do – go home to my beloved Latvia, even though I was leaving behind in a foreign land the grave of the dearest person, my mother, and I would never in my life visit it again. (How I wish now that I could bring her home, to the hushed Sils cemetery, and put her to rest beside her sons! But that is no longer in my power.)

Nowhere else but Latvia! It seemed to me so dear, so good at that time. I would be safe there. Many a time in my dreams I had seen my father's house and yard, and the winding Zellene stream at the bottom of the hill. What fun we children used to have catching crabs and eel-pouts, and the blue dragonflies above eddies! In spring the stream flooded, and afterwards the meadows would turn yellow from the blossoming marsh marigolds. Alas, how distant and yet near it all seemed! In those days I didn't understand yet that the descendants would never own the house their father had built on a 15-hectare piece of land which, in addition to a Lāčplēsis Medal, he had received as a reward for his heroic part in the War of Liberation². The children had the curse

² *War of Liberation* – This took place between the autumn of 1918 and the spring of 1920, after which Latvia became free and independent of both Russia and Germany.

of his «sins» on them, and many privileges given to others were denied them here, too, in their own homeland.

I recall also how in the prison camp in Tomsk, an order was read to us before we were put on barges, an order that said we had been settled in Siberia for all time and there would be no way back, and how the Latvians listened in deathly silence. I realised that they didn't believe it. The tyrants didn't know then how difficult it would be to destroy the deeply buried hatred our nation feels for violence, humiliation, imprisonment and malice.

Aunt Antonija packed enough bread to last a few days into a small wooden box, but mostly she put in «*pryaniks*», which don't dry out for a long time. We already knew that my fellow traveller was Aija Čude, who was the same age as I and had been my classmate in Novikova. We set off together, which was safer, after all. We sewed the money into our shirts. Aija's mother and two brothers, like my brother, hadn't been freed yet. We said goodbye to our classmates and teachers, and one April morning boarded an open barge that was bound for Novosibirsk. We didn't have to buy a ticket. I no longer remember how many days and nights we spent on the barge. We were in the open throughout the voyage. We didn't get undressed even once, and at night we were chilled to the bone. On my return home I coughed for a year, despite travelling in my only, by then threadbare winter coat and felt boots.

We arrived in the big Siberian city of Novosibirsk. At the railway station we met many Latvians who were returning home. They told us that it was very difficult to obtain tickets and that they had already been waiting for a week. We spent the night on a bench at the station.

The office for advance bookings was located somewhere in the city. The next morning we went there. The rooms were crammed

full of people. They were buying tickets ten or more days in advance. Where could we stay? Pushed to one side in the crowd, we stood around for a while. Our miserable appearance had probably attracted a soldier's attention. He was a German whose parents had also been deported. He came up to us and asked where and when we wanted to go. He offered to help us. Aija and I gave this stranger the money for two tickets, in fact all we had. We waited for him in the crowd for a considerable length of time. In those days we didn't know that a person like this young German we met by chance could be compassionate and helpful. He was sympathetic and decent. We didn't ask him his name or address. And he really did come back with two tickets he had obtained, for the train leaving that day! He accompanied us to a tram (we'd never seen one before), and we got to the train, which had already pulled into the station, in good time. I wonder if what this soldier did wasn't much more than the so-called heroic deeds extolled by the army.

I arrived at the Lizums station on 26 May, 1955. Aija continued her journey to Gulbene. It was a warm spring evening. My appearance attracted the attention of the local inhabitants, for I was carrying a small wooden box tied with string, and wearing felt boots when everything around us was green. I asked for the directions to the «Burtnieki» homestead, which was situated about 3 kilometres from the station. I walked into the yard. I knew that my brother was now living here, and that he had married while we were away. This homestead belonged to his father-in-law, who was also in a prison camp. My brother wasn't at home, but my sister-in-law Ausma welcomed me. No-one could have known when I'd arrive. My brother rushed home the next morning. He was extremely happy, but obviously also surprised at my pitiful appearance. He was still working in Ranka.

In Novikova I had attended sixth grade but hadn't completed it because I left. My brother's first task was to make sure I was clean and decently dressed (he even taught me how to brush my teeth), and to see to my education. We both went to the Russian school in Gulbene, where examinations had already begun. The principal took me into the classroom where the mathematics tests were on. I hadn't studied, I didn't have any books either, but the teacher showed me to a seat without any further ado and handed me the problem that was set. I solved it quickly and correctly. The teacher then explained when the next tests were, and said that if I couldn't manage to sit for them that spring, I could do them in autumn. I completed all three tests and got good or excellent marks without having studied for them. I can still recall the three questions I got in the last test, which was botany. The botany teacher introduced me to the other students and asked me where I had come from. He urged me to continue my studies at their school in autumn. It must be said that both the Novikova and Borovoye teachers, who taught under such primitive conditions when compared to our schools, could impart such sound basic knowledge in all subjects that later on I never felt inferior to the students who had gone to school here in Latvia. In fact, more often than not, it was the opposite. I am grateful to all the kind people, including teachers, whom I got to know during my painful childhood.

When autumn came, I had to decide what to do next. I took my brother's advice to continue my education despite the hardship. There was only one wage-earner in my brother's family, and I was an additional dependant. But education was important. My godmother and godfather lent a helping hand.

I was enrolled in seventh grade, not in the Russian school but a Latvian one, where the teachers were not worried that I wouldn't

be able to keep up in all the subjects, which were taught in Latvian. The other local schools had advised me to enrol one grade lower. I was very eager to catch up, and after learning Latvian well in one year and receiving excellent marks in the test, I felt I had at least partly proved myself and fulfilled my wish to be as good as the other pupils. I could also please those who were near and dear to me, and who later in my life helped me first to complete the agriculture course at the Technical College in Stāmeriena, and then in 1966 to graduate with honours from the Latvian Academy of Agriculture.

It looked as if I had achieved my ambition. Indeed, I graduated from a Soviet tertiary education institution, at the academy I'd had contact with intelligent, understanding teaching staff and students. Yet here, too, I had to swallow the bitter pill of injustice, and that was as late as the 1960's. When my results in third year were so good that they were comparable to those of only a few other students in the Faculty of Agriculture, I was entitled to the so-called Lenin scholarship. However, it could not be granted to me, for even in the sixties the curse³ on me could not be lifted, either through my great diligence in getting a better education and being useful to my country, or through the openly expressed indignation at the injustice by the students of my year, or the attempt of the then Dean of the Faculty, Imants Gronskis, to use his influence so that justice might prevail. Everyone knew that in my case it wasn't so much a question of the honour as real financial support. But it was not in these people's power to melt the ice of hard-heartedness.

³ *The curse* – Those who had once fallen into the Soviet regime's disfavour remained marked people for the rest of their days, even after having suffered to the full whatever punishment had been meted out to them.

This incident once again took the wind out of my sails and was a strict reminder that everyone should know his or her place in this world. I realised that in future I would not be successful, there would always be an invisible force jealous of me (the harder I worked, the greater the jealousy). Obstacles would constantly be put in my path to thwart me. I have kept the hurt hidden deep in my heart. I have turned down many promising offers, such as the opportunity to do a post-graduate course or apply for promotion at work. These offers came from genuinely caring people, who had seen the potential, perhaps some qualities in me that could be developed under favourable conditions and would enable me to feel truly happy at home and at work. But they didn't know about the dark shadow over me, and I had no wish to sadden them.

That's how things were between August 1966 and the present (1989). I have been working at the «Amata» State farm in the Cēsis region since 1966. The farm is located about 100 kilometres from my family home, which we were forced to leave on 25 March, 1949, and to which I have never returned because strangers are living there now. Both my brothers have their final resting place in the peaceful Sils cemetery, where I often go, happy that I can visit these graves...

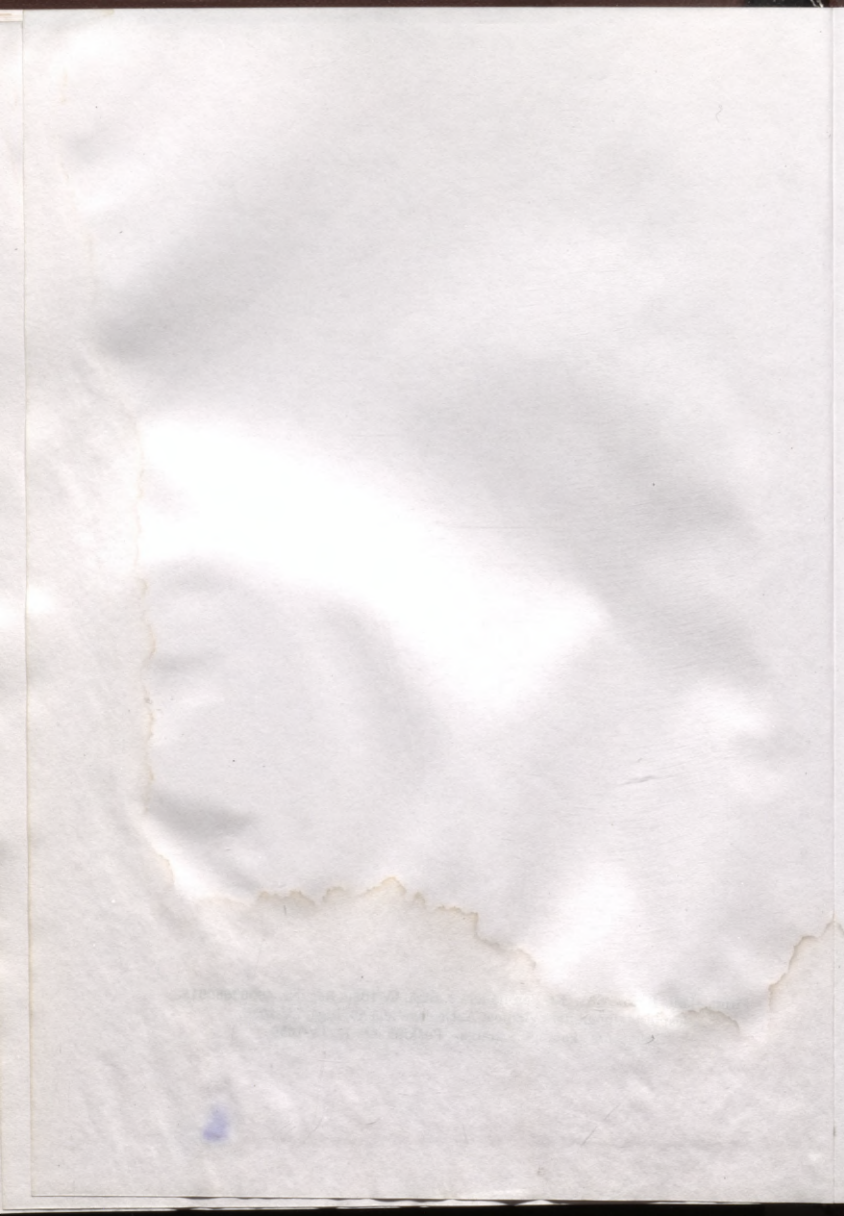
I am grateful to everyone who helped me in the time I have been at the «Amata», and all those who supported me in some way. I thank all those people in this world who have hated me, because that aroused a tenacity in me and gave me the strength to go on living. It may be hard to believe, but I am happy today. I am happy because I know now how much my arrival in this world meant to my family. I know the value of the fifty years that followed. Today I have to thank fate that even one of us four children (my sister died at birth) was destined to see the rebirth of

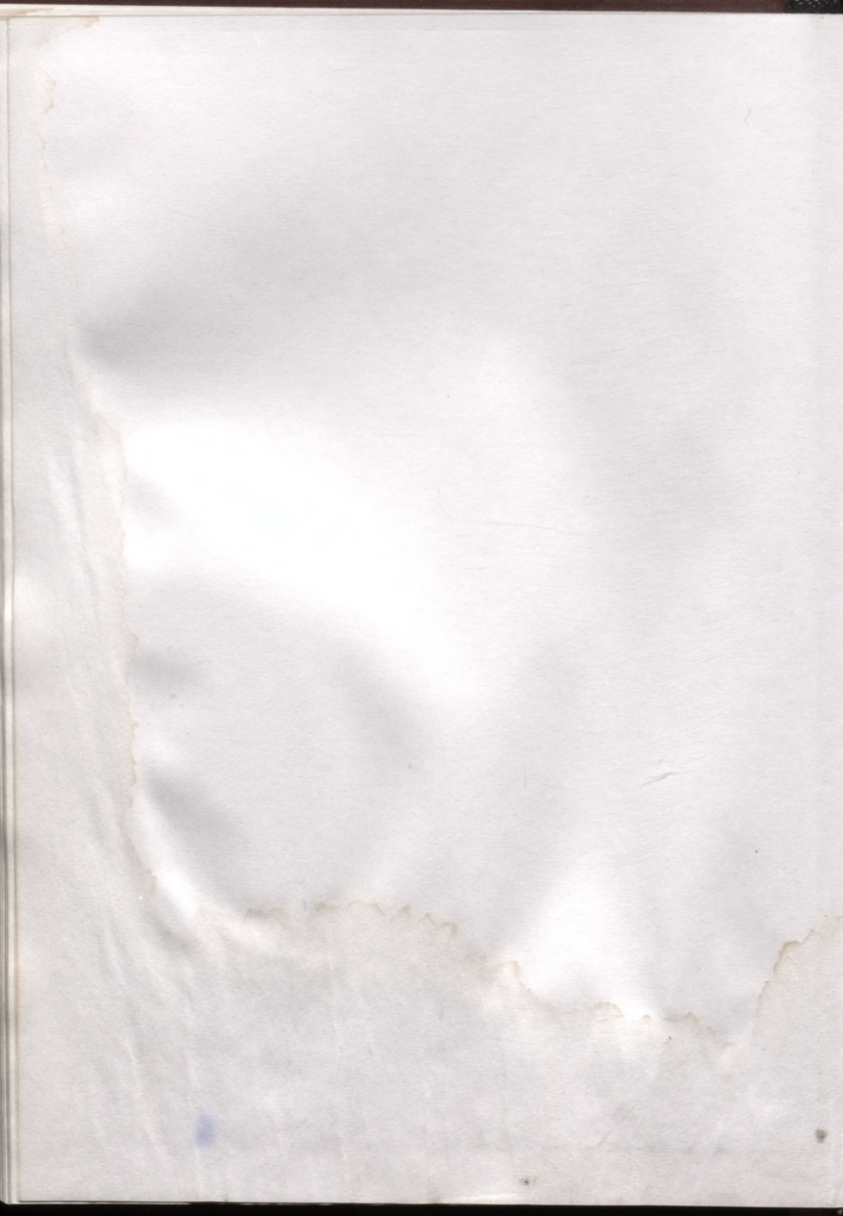
our nation. I have seen big countries in my life, yet I have realised what Latvia means to me. My heart has ached for this small stretch of land by the Baltic Sea which I call my motherland. And that is what happiness means to me, and it wasn't everyone's lot to experience it. But brute force and your lot in life also teach you to hate, hate those human characteristics which have crippled the lives of thousands of fellow human beings. I wonder to what extent these characteristics, so insidious and frequently not readily apparent, still exist today? Perhaps they will persist as long as they allow many cowardly, lazy people to do well in life and enjoy the fruits of other people's labour without doing an honest day's work.

Amata, December 1988



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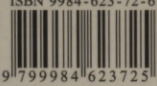
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Many years had to pass
before these stories could be told.

They are first-hand accounts
written by people deported from Latvia to
Siberia in the 1940's and 1950's. They tell about
the tragic times when a knock on the door
in the middle of the night meant the beginning
of a long, painful journey in a cattle wagon
to an unknown destination.

The deportees suffered extreme hardship,
and many thousands of them starved or froze
to death in the "Sleeping Land", as the early
inhabitants called Siberia.
Love of their homeland, Latvia, and the hope
of returning one day, helped to sustain those
who managed to survive.

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