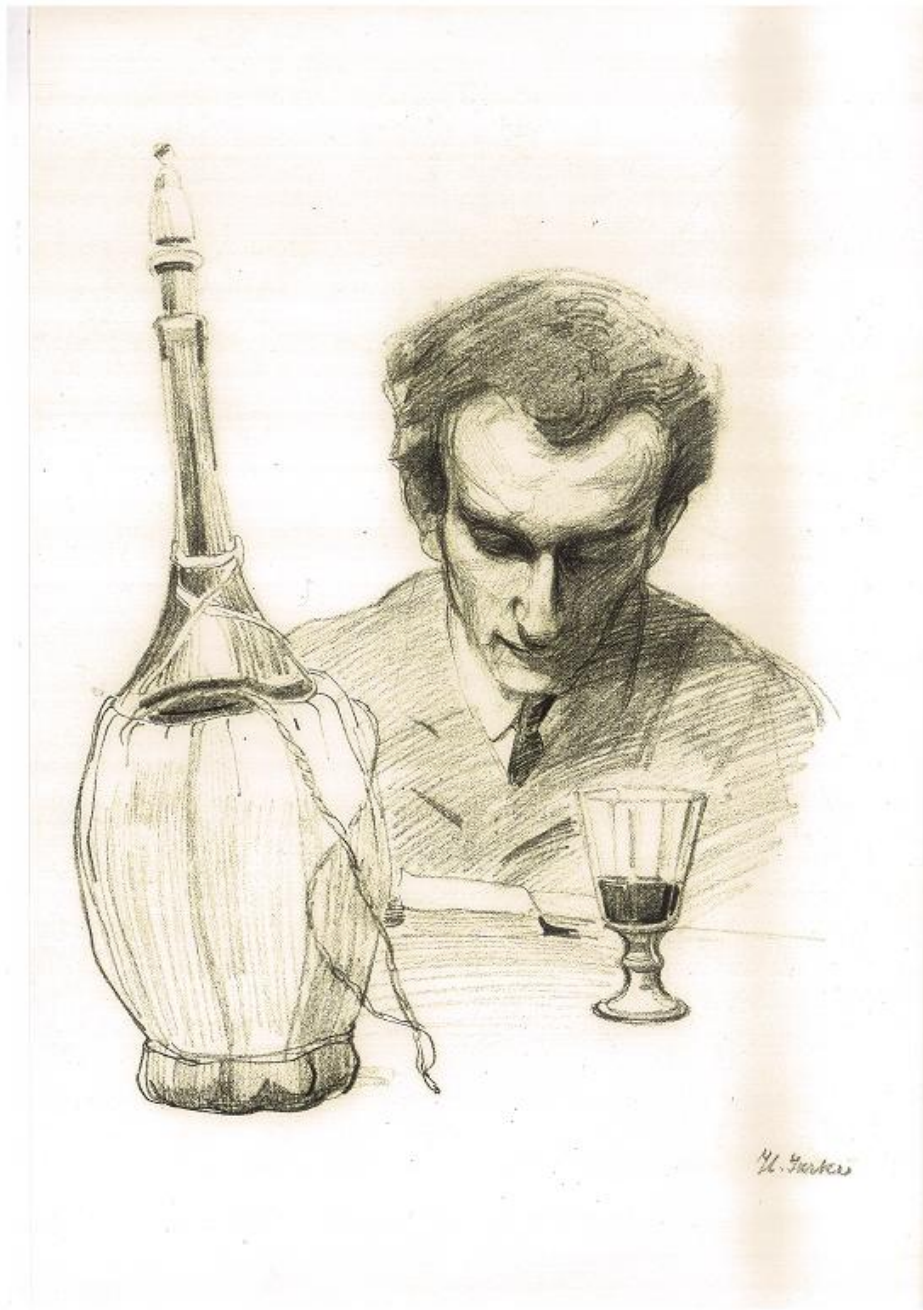


MEMOIRS FROM SIBERIA



FOREWORD

These two episodes of **my life¹** as a German prisoner of war in Russia from October 1916 to May 1920 were recorded by "Omi" and me shortly after my return to Hamburg in 1920 and we translated them into English as well as we could in 1963 for our grandchildren, in the hope that they might find them interesting and that they may remember us.

I was taken prisoner² near the river Stochod in Volhynia³ during an unsuccessful gas attack⁴ we made⁵ and where I got three shots through my legs.

Opa

[Omi = Barbara Gerson]

[Opa = Ernest Gerson⁶]

July 1964.

Comment [VAC1]: Am hoping to add this article as an addendum at some point.

¹ See Appendix A "A Brief History Of The Life Of My Father Ernest Gerson", Rawnsley, E - from the Karori Historical Society publication 'Stockade' #34, 2001.

² Almost certainly during the tail-end of the Brusilov Offensive (June 4 - September 20, 1916), regarded as one of the most lethal battles in world history (1.6 million casualties).

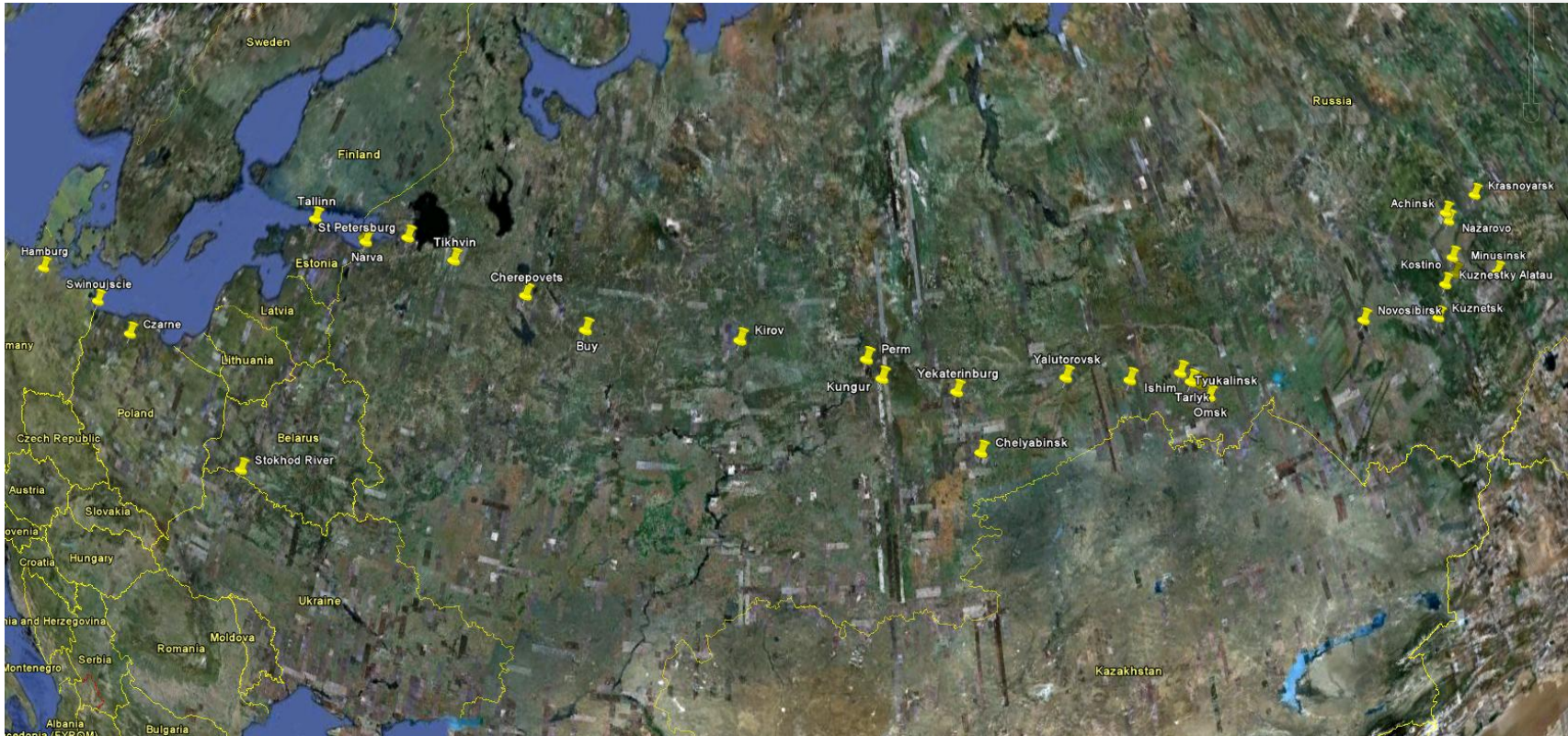
³ The Stochod (Stokhod) joins the Pripjat river 27 miles south-west of Pinsk (Belarus). The Stokhod runs from inside the Ukrainian border south of the Pripjat, towards central Volyn Oblast (Ukraine).

⁴ Possibly xylyl bromide (tear gas), but more likely chloride and/or phosgene. Mustard gas was not introduced in WWI until July 1917.

⁵ Opa was likely serving as part of either the 215th or 218th Infantry Division; requires further investigation.

⁶ Ernest Ludwig Gerson (10 October 1890 - 12 November 1974).

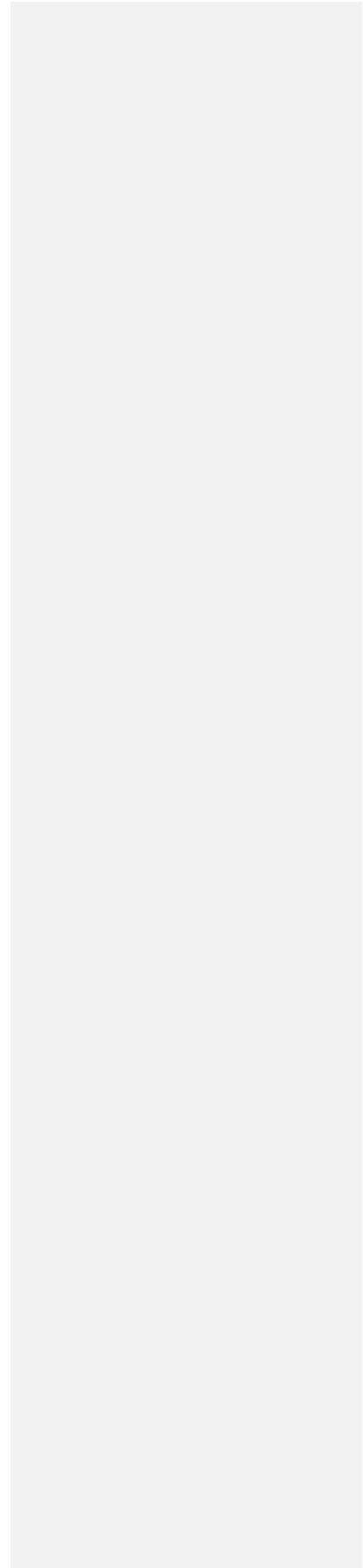
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Places of significance on the 7,000+ kilometre journey home.

Rudnik Andreyevsk

*RUDNIK
ANDREYEVSK*



Chapter I

One day a Mr. Selengoff arrived at our camp¹. He went to the office to introduce himself as the manager of a goldmine for which he needed 80 workers. He asked for permission to employ 40 men and 40 officers, the men to be as far as possible trade specialists such as locksmiths, electricians, joiners, fitters, cabinet makers, miners etc.

Mr. Selengoff looked like a very well to do man, smartly dressed and well groomed. His round and rosy face was clean shaven but for a little moustache. His low and lazy voice contrasted peculiarly with the mobility of his small grey eyes.

He assured the office that a good life awaited the prisoners of war in the mine. They would be completely free, he said, and their wages would be sufficient to live comfortably. Every one would work 8 hours a day according to his trade, and the management would provide provisions and clothes. In short, the prisoners would be treated in the same way as his Russian workers. Anyhow should anyone not like it, he could return to the camp at any time.

That evening Mr. Selengoff appeared at our cafeteria and treated every one of the rugged prisoners sitting at his table to plenty of wine and spirits. There was a big crowd around him all wishing to make his acquaintance in the hope of some future profit.

In his unctuous voice he painted a pleasant picture of the life awaiting at the mine. The men listened wide-eyed frequently bursting into loud applause. The low-pitched drawl of his speech seemed to give his words a special significance.

Next day the mine was common talk. It seemed to belong to a better world where everything was perfect. But is it not amazing, that no two people of the many who had listened to Mr. Selengoff repeated the same story. Even about such things as wages the opinions differed.

Of course a great number went to sign on. There were many specialists who really knew their jobs well and just as many pretending to know a trade although they had never handled a tool in their lives. These were bad times for us as prisoners in Siberia, our lot being even worse than that of the Russians. One had to fight one's way through the endless years so as not to starve or to

¹ Although not explicitly described, the camp where Opa was held was just outside the city of Krasnoyarsk, situated on the Yenisei river in central Siberia.

succumb to the terrible cold. No wonder that many who had been decent enough at home became cunning in trying to keep their heads above water by any means, foul or fair. The Russians knew this well and even liked it. They said, "Those Germans, how clever they are".

Soon afterwards however it became common knowledge that the government would not permit the departure of the officers. At the same time rumours spread that the mine had a very bad reputation and consequently could not obtain Russian labour. It was said to be situated high up in the mountains in ice and snow, far away from anywhere so that one would be fully at the mercy of the employers. One man alone would never be able to find his way back to inhabited places. Besides, the mine was supposed to have been neglected for a long time making the work there dangerous and unhealthy. Most of these disquieting tales were spread by an old Austrian sergeant-major. Eagerly he hurried from one to the other and stressing his good intentions warned everybody against the whole enterprise. Many gruesome things would await us there he told us in a secretive manner, without however, betraying the source of his knowledge.

Heated discussions took place in each of the earthen barracks, which housed us poor prisoners. On entering such an ill-lit cave-like place the first impression was a jumble of beams, studs, braces and rafters, among which our plank beds were fixed in two levels.

Here the prisoners argued passionately in German, Hungarian, Polish, Turkish and Yiddish. The Hungarians, with their proud bearing, would stand wildly swinging their arms like windmills while shouting at the tops of their voices making themselves heard miles away. Everybody familiar with these hard guttural sounds would think, "Aha, paprika!".

Quite different were the Galician Jews. Entering their barracks you would hear a general murmur as in a temple. They too all talked at the same time but in low and restrained tones like an intense whisper. Their gestures; fingers spread, palms upturned were as significant and eloquent as any words. They stood closely together with their beards unkempt and heads bent forward, their gesticulating fingers almost touching one another's noses. Intelligent, dirty, greyish-brown faces which seem to have known no other surroundings than these gloomy barracks. But even amongst some of those you would find some blue eyed types with reddish fair hair and round soft faces, a delightful look of expansive good nature on an honest countenance.

Who would not admire the inventive abundance of nature? How different did it create the Hungarian, how different the Jew. Did it not give special merits and peculiarities to every people? They all believe themselves to be the peak of creation - most of all the Germans. Arguments were spirited in their barracks. Those to whom it was not a well known fact that the Germans were a warlike nation would have found out quickly enough here on the Siberian steppe. While others argued in a lively way they nevertheless remained peaceful and stuck to the point. The educated Germans though hardly raising their voices easily became offensive and created the many hostile relationships which dominated the spirit of their community.

The uneducated Germans in their multidialectal arguments quickly lost their tempers and abused one another with rude words. Such disputes ended frequently in a brawl much to the amusement of the onlookers. Others passing the barracks would say, "Listen how the Germans love one another".

Happy is he who never endured the misery of long years spent in dark Russian earth barracks. Happy is he who does not know those wretched barracks where one was bitten in daytime by fleas and at night by bedbugs.

I am not quite sure whether Mr. Selengoff visited our dwellings. But if he did he must have been satisfied that he could offer us no more bugs than we already enjoyed, and that the general conditions in the mine were no more dismal than what he saw in the camp.

The grim picture which I describe of us and our life must however, be compared with the general living conditions in Siberia at the time. The peasants around us were poor, their houses and clothes were primitive and their appearance was rugged and unkempt especially in the long and hard winter. So they did not look so very much different from us. In the West all of us would have been regarded as outcasts.

Mr. Selengoff had every reason to be satisfied with his success. Only two days after his arrival the list of names had to be closed. More than forty men were prepared to risk it, although quite a few had been discouraged by the gossip and had had their names crossed out.

Those who went escaped from the boredom and drudgery of camp life. The recruits began to pack a *teplushka*¹, bargaining to get rid

¹ Теплушка (heated coach). A goods wagon which had an iron stove in the centre.

Rudnik Andreyevsk

of superfluous things and to buy others which were thought to be of use.



Krasnoyarsk, including a view of the Yenisei River, circa 1911.

Rudnik Andreyevsk



A *teplushka* from circa 1910, housing a cast iron stove and capable of transporting up to 40 people.

Chapter II

The forty fellow sufferers met the next morning at the appointed time in front of the office. No West European can have any idea of what these figures looked like with their few poor belongings: often old mended pieces of uniforms from different armies mingled with Russian clothes, caps in all European and Asiatic fashions, small suitcases, boxes of rough boards, sacks and parcels and everything in all colours possible. Let no one think that the prisoners were particularly badly off. On the contrary, they were a selection of the most courageous and adventurous; those who were not completely crushed by the long years of imprisonment and who still had a spark of hope and were prepared to take risks. How many there were left sitting apathetically in the barracks full of hopeless sadness. They did not believe that they would see their homelands again and the thought of their loss aroused in many of them no emotions other than hate and bitterness. Yes, sorrow and need had even driven a number of them insane and from their lips you could hear the sad laughter of madness.

At the time the caravan set out Mr. Selengoff had disappeared from the scene. Instead a Sergeant Major of the militia with a sabre and pistol had taken over, but he seemed to be good natured fellow. On arrival at the station the usual waiting took place, until at long last one could enter the goods wagon which had an iron stove in the centre. In the meantime the guard bought plenty of food; bread, butter, sausage and cheese. Each man went to help himself to boiling water for his tea according to Russian custom. Each person stood in the queue waiting for his turn to draw from the water heater (*kipyatok*¹) which the government ran at every station. The train took us to Achinsk² and from there on an unfinished branch-line continued until it ended in the middle of the steppe. The whole journey took about 36 hours.

There were only two houses and a small fenced-in area for baggage. We had ample time to look around and saw that this part of the steppe was as empty and barren as that which stretches along the Yenisei³ to the north. Suddenly some horses and carts appeared over the top of the next hill. As they galloped towards us

¹ Кипяток – Literally “boiling or recently boiled water”.

² Ачинск - a city in Krasnoyarsk Krai, located on the right bank of the Chulym River near its intersection with the Trans-Siberian Railway, 114 miles west of Krasnoyarsk.

³ The 5th longest river in the world.

we became aware of the peculiar way in which all Russian peasants talk to their horses, a thing which was to accompany us during the four days drive over the steppe and into the mountains. What a stream of endearments, threats, warnings and profanities! Most probably you have read about this in Russian novels, but you'll certainly not find in writing the swearword of which the peasant is most fond and which he uses in endless variations to encourage his horse. It is absolutely unprintable and none of our worst language could compete.

The loading of the luggage was accompanied by the usual quarrelling in German, Hungarian and Russian, until at last we started off at a brisk trot. Of course every cart was heavily overloaded. The road was like all roads in the steppe, just ruts in the grass. It was at least 50 yards wide and steadily increasing in width. So we went along up and down hill, passing swamps and lakes, sometimes a small settlement of Moslem Tartars, more rarely a Christian village with a church. Here you could walk for half or even a whole day and meet neither man nor beast. Perhaps you might glimpse a weasel hurrying into its hole or hear a lark singing.

Should you meet a peasant, you offer each other a smoke and a long conversation starts up. Stopping at a peasant house you can be sure that the *samovar* will be put on at once and that whatever is in the house will be dished up for you. If you want to stay overnight there is ample room either on the benches running along the walls or on the floor. You share this dormitory with the other men and the housewife spreads blankets and mats. She and her husband sleep fully dressed on the bed. Whoever wants may sleep on the oven. The smaller children sleep in a loft under the ceiling and the baby lies in a box hanging down from it by four ropes like a swing.

Dogs, cats and chickens are also about and sometimes even the odd pig, but six legged creatures dwell and feed on men and beast alike. They are the true rulers of Russia. Thus the nights on this journey were spent.

The caravan of six carts was soon spread over several miles and the speedy driving proved to be careless driving, a not uncommon characteristic of Russians in such cases. After a few hours the horses were tired and sweating and the pleasure of travelling on the carts came to an end. We had to walk. A truly Siberian sun burned down on the wanderers. Only those who could enjoy the beauty of nature, the immense expanse of the rolling steppes with

the clear blue sky above and those who had a good sense of humour could avoid depression and moodiness.

No wonder that there was soon, colourful in a variety of tongues, much grumbling, swearing and abuse. Splendid opportunities for this came in such incidents as; the periodical breakdown of carriages involving the unloading and reloading of heaps of baggage, the refusal of exhausted horses to go on, gusts of wind filling the eyes with sand or occasionally a steeper part of the way. Happy was he who even then was able to forget the burden of his body and to take in the splendour which spread before his eyes, little diversity though it offered. You could not find attractive villages with red roofs and pointed steeples nor romantic monuments of a great past. Lonely and endless stretched the green rolling hills of the steppes like the gentle swell of the infinite ocean. Calmer still was the sky, deep blue at the zenith as in the countries of the south, but becoming paler towards the horizon and fusing with the earth in a brilliant glimmering yellow. Now visualise in this cruel immensity the poor wretches that we were, bent and panting, pushing the carts up the hills, the rough little peasant horses not being able to pull any more.

What misery in such a sublime setting.

The rare small villages displayed peculiar hexagonal log-houses covered with pointed thatched roofs, and surrounded by mires of dirt and manure. When we passed through such a village the women would not miss such a spectacle. There they stood and stared at us out of their dark slanting eyes, their hair like black wool, their clothes colourful rags. Dirty children and dogs were noisily crowding around their feet. No men were to be seen as they were out in the steppe with their herds of horses.

The ranges which we had to cross became more and more significant, the view from their ridges more extensive but their ascent more arduous. The fatigue grew worse from day to day.

Isolated groups of pines and larches appeared; probably the remnants of large and ancient forests, these isolated groups now also destined to perish. The large boulders scattered in the steppe were surprising and we saw them more and more frequently. There were big upright stones, sometimes on their own and sometimes in large groups. Often they reached a height of ten feet, mighty blocks of granite. The stone giants stood on artificial circular mounds, and four smaller stones as though forming a guard, were placed around the foot of the hillock. Another type of these remarkable monuments had the large boulder standing in the

centre of a square paved court, framed by upright standing slabs. According to tradition these are tombs of the old Tartar and Kyrgyz tribes who formerly ruled these steppes. Nevertheless these were monuments of the past, a past quite different from our own but all the more interesting because of the mystery surrounding it.

In the afternoon of our third day of travelling a higher and more rugged mountain appeared. Growing fatigue and various discouragements undermined the morale of most of the party. As long as there was a possibility of turning back we heard nothing but good about the mine from the Sergeant Major, but now as we had advanced so far he changed his tune. He did not hesitate anymore about telling us some unpleasant truths.

The peasants who let us spend the nights under their roofs used to go up into the mountains every year to do some prospecting for gold. What they had to say about Rudnik¹ Andreyevsk also sounded rather ominous. They said it lay high up in the mountains in a barren valley and only two summer months were snow free. During this time any outside communication was out of the question, the supply of provisions impossible and hunger became a regular guest. At the same time the two fine months had the disadvantage of mosquitoes and stinging flies which were such a pest that it was agony to stay in the open air. We could well believe this information as in one of the Tartar villages the wells were still frozen solid despite a burning June sun.

These gloomy forecasts by people who knew the situation put a stop to our hope of saving money or of doing a little prospecting ourselves. Many were even fearful of becoming enslaved. Some of the courageous began to consider whether and how an escape could be managed.

Mr. Selengoff might well tell us that nobody would be prevented from leaving if he did not like it, as he knew only too well that any escape on foot out of this wilderness was impossible. Even if a man could have walked the 150 miles to the railway he could have done so only by leaving every single one of his possessions behind. And which of us poor devils had the money to hire a cart and horses?

On the third evening of our journey through the steppe the caravan stopped for the night at a bigger village, Savedienye. According to the Sergeant Major, Mr. Selengoff and the technical manager of the mine were expected to meet us here the following morning.

Comment [JR2]: Possibly what is now 'Andreevka' in the Kuznestk Alatau?

Comment [VAC3]: Cyrillic: Саведиеные. Unknown location.

¹ Рудник - Literally 'mine'.

They were eagerly awaited and the question arose as to how we could avoid some of the difficulties which seemed to await us, or at least how we could obtain some improvements. Again there was big talk, a repetition of what had gone on before the expedition started. More than one who had been full of fear a minute before regained his courage in the heat of discussion. Everybody noisily rehearsed the heroic speeches which they would make to the two fateful men.

One of the topics of conversation was the supposedly deceptive appearance of Mr. Selengoff. The non-Germans said that he really was a German and that his true name was "Seelenhof" - a Russian could not be so calculating and underhand. The Germans however would not let that pass and said that he was more likely to be a Jew.

Eventually both men arrived, in good carriages with good horses. We all assembled silently in a yard. The technical manager, an apparently good natured, elderly Polish gentleman stood before Mr. Selengoff not much less timidly than the majority of his new subordinates. Finally after a short whispered conversation between the chiefs we were told by the Pole to arrange ourselves according to our trades.

Now it was time for me to step forward. None of us could speak Russian but my knowledge of French and the ease which I was able to talk to strangers and superiors made me our natural negotiator. To my questions I received plenty of satisfactory and reassuring information. The Pole's manner especially struck us as being very kind and amiable. It was agreed that the most important questions, mainly those of wages, should be settled by negotiation at Rudnik Andreyevsk. Employers and workers should negotiate as equals.

Soon we were ready to depart. On this day we had to cover a distance of fifty miles partly on backbreaking roads through the mountain ranges. The number of carriages was increased and the small peasant horses were replaced by fresh and strong horses from the mine. Now there were seats for all and we set off at a brisk trot.

After having travelled 25 miles we came to a Tartar hamlet, Teplorietchka (warm streamlet). Here a turbulent and awe-inspiring stream came tumbling out of the mountain range which rose steeply behind the village. We were allowed no rest but started an exhausting journey by foot mostly steeply uphill on stony rugged tracks.

Comment [VAC4]: Cyrillic: Теплоричка. тепло - warm. Unknown location. This could be Teplorchka, with rechka (речка) meaning "small, narrow river". Thus 'Теплоречка': heat-creek.

Those who were not used to mountains stumbled, swearing over rubble and roots and soon our unsuitable shoes showed marks of the stones. Many a fall on these or into the mud brought forth at least a cheer from those who were just then only spectators. It was not long before the trip became really adventurous. Sometimes the river itself served for a road and we had to mount. The water rose above the axels and at times over the floors of the carts which swayed wildly over large granite blocks. Luggage toppled over and sometimes even a man. We were becoming very dispirited. What would be the end of all this, was there any hope left for a return home? How could we endure a winter of ten months high up in these mountains when years of life as prisoners of war had already sapped our strength and health?

But the more exhausting the way, the more splendid became the landscape; steeply wooded mountains, gigantic pines and larches, fallen trees wildly covering the ground amidst granite boulders and masses of shrubs. Vertical walls soared to the sky awing those who had never before seen the Alps or the Carpathians. At high points the snow-covered peaks of the Kuznetsky Alatau¹ became visible and even nearby snow began to appear on the northern slopes.

Now it was obvious that the peasants of the steppes had not exaggerated and also that the black outlook of the Austrian Sergeant Major had not been unfounded.

But now it was too late. There was no choice left, we had to go on. Higher and higher crossing wild green mountain streams up towards the threatening snow covered tops. As if to sap our last ounce of courage, a strong blizzard started as dusk fell. The way led through deep snow. Man and horse alike were left panting. The chain of carts had stretched so far that it was no longer possible to see from one to the other.

Suddenly, the clouds parted for a few seconds and where everyone expected to see blue sky a mountain dome bathed in sunlight appeared. High up on the slope we could make out a black spot which we recognised with horror as an entrance to a mine. At the same time we caught a glimpse of a narrow and steep rocky valley. It was quite bare apart from many wooden houses which cluttered it and which stretched to a point not far below the black hole.

¹ Kuznetsk Alatau (Кузнецкий Алатан) – a mountain range in South Siberia, roughly 300km in length, with elevation up to 2,178 meters. The range is known to contain rich deposits of iron, manganese and gold.

Rudnik Andreyevsk

Wretched as the site of our new home appeared, it for the moment at least meant the end of our exhausting journey. But we were not there yet. The last stretch was particularly steep and went through waist-deep snow alternating with slippery corduroy track. The combined forces of man and beast were hardly sufficient to reach our destination which seemed to retreat again and again.

What we saw from nearby was not pleasant either. General dilapidation and scrap heaps embedded in the deep snow. The houses were scattered without order and linked up with barely passable footpaths. We had to drag our belongings from the stables at the bottom of the settlement to a barracks right at the top. This one, although not an earth barracks, was if possible still dirtier than those which we had left behind.

It received us coldly and inhospitably; the stove out of order, windows broken and no means of cooking.

We were at once reassured that these were only temporary quarters and that we would find private lodgings and board with the Russian workers families, who lived in the many single little houses.

Hope for a warm meal and a chance to dry our soaking wet clothes quickly died. We were however supplied with bread, salted fish, butter, tea and sugar. After this rather meagre supper we stretched ourselves on the dirty wooden bunks. We soon became the prey of an army of vermin and though dead tired, could not find much sleep.

Rudnik Andreyevsk



The Kuznetsk Alatau

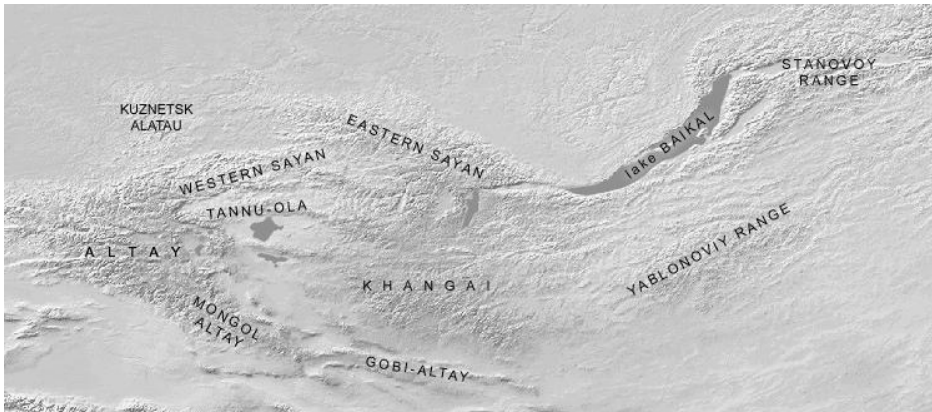


Sunset over the Kuznetsk Alatau

Rudnik Andreyevsk



A mountain ridge inside the Kuznetsk Alatau



A map showing the Kuznetsk Alatau (upper left) in relation to the Altay and Sayan Mountains, with Lake Baikal in the East

Chapter III

It is worth saying a few more words about the group which fate had brought together in this forsaken place. It has already been mentioned that we belonged to various nationalities and that our talk was reminiscent of Babel. Differences in the individuals were as pronounced as the differences in nationality. An onlooker must have been astonished by the peculiar mixture of characters.

It is nothing new that times of upheaval bring out to a greater degree the baser instincts, inherent in us all. This does not mean that there were no decent and generous individuals who not withstanding their own misery always tried to be helpful and of use to others.

The general demoralisation in Russia had naturally contributed to our moral decline. The same applied to the foreign troops which at that time were attached to the White Army of Admiral Kolchak¹, to save the world from communism.

To give only one example; thieving had always been an accomplished art in Russia. English, French and Italian soldiers were able apprentices and stole from their own army stores, any of those things on which they could lay their hands. These things were eventually sold openly in the bazaars. Excellent shoes, cloth for uniforms, tins of food, tobacco and so on, all astonishingly cheap.

Four of the prisoners distinguished themselves from the crowd with their marked personalities. First of all, corpulent Kropp from Hamburg, short as his name, broad, bulky, with a big round head and utterly lazy. His phlegmatic nature would be disturbed only when his fury was aroused. His heavy body had a natural inclination towards laziness and comfort. None of us had lamented so much during the climb as he. His objective thinking made him immediately aware that he had brought himself into a position contrary to his liking. He declared at once with the greatest determination that he would work as little as possible and would limit crawling around on these horrible footpaths to the barest minimum. "Up there", he said pointing to the black entrance of the mine 250 feet higher up, "not even ten horses will drag me up there". It must be said in his favour that he almost kept his word

¹ Aleksandr Vasiliyevich Kolchak (November 16 1874 – February 7 1920), a naval commander during WWI, later becoming head of a division of the anti-Bolshevik *White Forces* during the Russian Civil War.

and this not only gave him great satisfaction, but it also gave him an even greater opinion of himself. But the manager was not so happy about it all.

Abel, like Kropp had enlisted as a mechanical engineer, but they were completely unlike, not only in appearance but in character and temperament. Abel was tall, thin, a great talker and gesticulator while Kropp was dependable, careful in the choice of his words and precise in his work when he did any. It didn't take long to see through Abel. He was a braggart prone to lying and exaggerating and forever boasting about his wide experience in his work, although it was soon enough shown that hadn't the slightest idea about it. He was a tactless backslapping kind of fellow clumsily trying to get on an intimate footing with the Russians posing unasked as our representative. All those undesirable features which developed in years spent behind barbed wire were concentrated in him.

It didn't mean anything that he told the Russians he was a trained engineer but he had the temerity to try the same tale on us. As well as this he talked a great deal about his fine middleclass background and education, also telling us that he had been on the way to obtaining a commission in the army. We had to listen to an endless display of patriotism and monarchist leanings, yet many of us knew that he had served in the Green Guard at Achinsk, and this was a branch of the communist troops.

His vulgar Berlin dialect reflected his so-called "good" education. His ignorance was sometimes amusing and once he said to me, "Can you tell me this? There are an awful lot of stones lying around these mountains. What on earth will become of them when they grow and themselves become high mountains in the future?" When I asked him if he had read that in a book, he said that he must have read it somewhere or another. And yet another priceless story about him which he related as follows, "I worked on an estate near the river Volga¹ and one day a Cossack officer came for a visit. He wanted to break in a wild horse but simply couldn't do it, as the beast threw him every blasted second. In the end I couldn't stand it any longer and said 'Now Mister, let me have a go!' On I jumped and what do you think? It went like lightening and threw me only once." Everybody listened in dead silence because we were too mystified that he should try to put across such utter rubbish.

¹ The largest river in Europe in terms of length and volume of discharge.

Rudnik Andreyevsk

You had to listen to many a doubtful story which the prisoners told about their past and which you were supposed to believe. But after all who were they and where did they really come from?

Some tried to pass for successful businessmen, lawyers or other people of some standing. No doubt on the return home they would probably be received with the words "Henry, how nice to see you back, you probably have a great deal to tell us, but first of all quickly sweep the office and take this parcel to the post office."

Others boasted about their heroic deeds although in fact they had never been in battle. After listening to a number of these stories you could not help getting the impression that only the most daring and cold blooded soldiers had been taken prisoner. As the greatest part of the Hungarian Army was now assembled in Siberia, they surely must have contributed more to German successes in the war than any other army. Nobody showed their disbelief however incredibly fantastic these tales sounded. That was our "*modus vivendi*".

Four prisoners have been mentioned as distinguishing themselves from the crowd. Koshdan I shall describe later and as this is written for friends and family, it is not necessary to describe myself.

Chapter IV

We started work the next day at noon. Some of us stayed behind and these were a shoemaker, a tailor, a cook and a mason; the latter having to build a big brick oven for cooking. Work began very leisurely as every person who knows Russian can well imagine. Much time was spent talking, showing us our working places and distributing the tools. I might add here that even later on, a considerable part of our working hours were spent in a similar way.

It was different only with the piecework, boring, drilling, blasting and hauling below ground. Although we did not work hard at all, our clothes soon began to get torn and grimy at an alarming rate. The tailor and the shoemaker were fully occupied with repairs and according to Mr. Selengoff the expense for these and for the cook were born by him. We could buy our clothes, shoes and our rations at the general store of the mine and the money from these items was to be deducted from our monthly wages, although we did not know the amount of these at the time.

Whenever this subject was brought up, the manager would declare that he would not decide anything before Mr. Selengoff arrived. This also applied to other problems about which we approached him. He was very polite, spoke excellent French, asked after our health and always offered us a seat. He listened with sympathy and understanding to our complaints about lodgings, distribution of food and tobacco, unhealthy dampness in the workshops or the low quality of the shoes which, though bought for hundreds of *rubles*, went to pieces in no time at all. Every time he reassured us that all this would be taken care of as soon as Selengoff arrived.

Obviously the mine was badly run down. The rain poured through the rotten roofs into the engineer rooms. Everything was rusty. The electric cables were torn and tangled. The elevated cart which was lead from the mouth of the mine down into the valley was in such a state as to endanger our lives. The air compressor to drive the drills in the mine was out of action and the technical manager was without any experience whatsoever concerning engines.

With forty new men it had become possible to open the mine again after it had long been at a standstill. The works, a rather old enterprise, exploited a quartz vein which traversed the whole mountain at a steep angle. The access to this vein was by a tunnel the various branches of which were several miles long. I was told that the interior construction was very primitive and that the work in it and especially the traffic was very dangerous.

The mine was worked the following way. The gold was embedded in the quartz in minute grains rarely big enough to be seen with the naked eye. The lumps of quartz after being blasted were taken down on the elevated track to the so-called factory 300 feet below the entrance to the mine. Here the lumps were crushed in a stamping mill then fed into two grinders which were driven by a twelve horsepower water turbine. Broadly speaking the grinders could be described as follows: a stone channel, rectangular in cross section but in the shape of a circle about 12 feet in diameter, this channel being lined with steel. In it circulated two powerful stone wheels lined with steel and attached to a common axle. The channel which was about 18 inches by 18 inches was filled with slowly running water. At a particular point the water flowed through a very fine sieve and then over a number of sloping brass slabs which lead into several reservoirs in another building.

The crushed quartz was fed into the mill channel, the heavy wheels of which ground it into extremely fine dust which remained suspended in the rotating water. Mercury was added half hourly to the rotating mass, this mercury dispersing as fine particles which when mixed with the quartz powder formed an amalgam with the gold. This heavy amalgam settled at the bottom of the channel while the lighter quartz dust was carried through the sieve and brass slabs by the water. The remaining free particles of mercury were completely absorbed by the brass and the quartz dust was carried into the reservoirs from where it was removed onto dumps.

There was still sufficient gold left in the quartz dust to warrant a further extraction. The quartz dust was taken to huge wooden vats about 12 feet high and about 12 feet in diameter where it was washed in a solution of sodium cyanide until the last traces of gold were dissolved. While the grinder was going, the entrance was barred to outsiders and the work was always supervised by an inspector of the police.

Every 24 hours the mill was stopped, the wheels lifted and the water released. In the presence of the manager the lumps of gold amalgam were collected and immediately were heated in a retort in an adjoining room to separate the gold and the mercury. After an interval of an hour, work in the mill resumed.

The general arrangements were probably quite practical and up to date but everything was in such a bad state of repair that to start work again under these conditions was dangerous for men and machines alike. Several factors contributed to this. The water entered the turbines irregularly and carried much dirt with it. The

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bearings of the turbines, the drive shafts and the grinders were badly worn and were running hot all the time. Nevertheless, we were asked to use the scarce oil sparingly. No wonder that frequently belts came off their pulley and bearings burst into flames. As well as these machines, many others were used and many others lay in ruins outside. It must be borne in mind that the transport of these enormous machines from the U.S.A., England and Germany had alone cost enormous sums of money.

Other installations also needed a thorough overhaul, two big and a small dynamo, a large and small gas generator, an air compressor, extensive electric and telephone wires and a big metal lathe. Repairs were also needed on the roads and on the bins. Some men were permanently busy with carpentry, woodcutting and coach driving.

As the Russian workers numbered only a few and since nobody had the intention of wearing themselves out, it is easy to realize that even with forty prisoners of war progress was bound to be slow. Nevertheless, drilling in the mine was taken up at once. It was the custom in Russia, wherever you worked, to have a "smoko" from time to time. Our foreman would say "let's have a smoke" and everyone would obey at once. The same held true in factory and field and the farmer himself would suggest it to his workers. All would then roll a cigarette or light a pipe.

Russians who had been working as prisoners of war in Germany told us of their experiences. They were greatly impressed by German thoroughness, precision and neatness and many were of the opinion that Russians should learn from their example, but most of them pointed out how much they had missed "the smoko". In Germany when they started to roll a cigarette or light a pipe the owner or foreman would say, "You can smoke at lunchtime. We are working now." Quite unthinkable in Russia.

In spite of all this some results were achieved. The machines had been cleaned and the turbines and grinders assembled, when after a full three weeks Selengoff arrived.

We realized then that he was not always as sleepy as he previously seemed. With his hands in his pockets and his fat stomach protruding he looked on and discovered that nothing was being done fast enough. He spoke only to hurry us on, but this was not very successful as only a few showed a special desire to please him and most of us did not move any more quickly.

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On such occasions the indolence shown by stout Kropp was truly heroic. Naturally Abels' behaviour was exactly the opposite and to see these two characters performing was highly amusing. If Abel had been happily idle smoking a cigarette in a quiet corner, he would jump into feverish action as soon as he saw Selengoff or a foreman approaching. If his hands had been innocent of work he would go as far as to dip them in dirty oil. He would start shouting orders as if there was somebody to obey them and to impress people he always kept a fine little showpiece of his work.

Though physically lazy Kropp was mentally alert and capable, and in different situations he often gave sound advice. Abel was not shy at passing it off as his own to those people who counted. With such tricks he actually succeeded in impressing the Russians and in gaining their confidence, and with this he could have some hope of his wages being favourably adjusted.

Chapter V

I have not yet mentioned Koshdan, one of the most prominent members of our community. As well as some Russian, a little Czech, Hungarian and Italian, he spoke German and Polish although brokenly. He was very proud of his linguistic ability and boasted that he was speaking not only in German but Austrian. However he was a past master at swearing in all of these languages. He was also a so-called "*Wasserpolak*", a nickname for that part of the population living jammed in between Poles, Czechs and Germans, who have not got a pure language of their own. Their main occupation is coal mining.

Koshdan had worked in Germany with Italians, in Austria with Croats and Hungarians, and had roamed about quite considerably in Russia; owing his scanty Russian to several short-lived marriages with Russian women. These amorous adventures did not prevent him from talking about his wife and children at home in the most touching manner. Koshdan's character is very difficult to describe but it could be said that it was as complicated a mixture as his language. From one second to the next his sensitivity would change in startling crudity and this characteristic was clearly shown in his relationship with women at Rudnik Andreyevsk. He was very popular with them and they seemed to like his pawing and pinching.

Koshdan had told Selengoff that he had been a foreman of a mine in Austrian Silesia so it was hoped that quick progress would be achieved with this experience available. Koshdan was supposed to do all the designs concerning work underground, to distribute the work and to keep the records.

Despite his miserable Polish it struck a chord in the heart of the manager, and he was the only one among us who was entrusted with a position of superiority. After only two days a special dwelling was allotted to him and he was to share this with three others of his own choice. These lucky ones were Kropp, Abel and myself; so we moved into this tiny cottage of three rooms and a kitchen. Everything was bright and pleasant, and there was a wide and splendid view. All this was well suited to make people like us who had known nothing but dirty barracks for years feel comfortable.

Koshdan was very keen on money, but even so had gambled away 100 *rubles* before he had earned a single *kopek*¹. It was a point of

¹ There are 100 kopeks in a ruble.

honour with him to pay these bets immediately and to this end he borrowed, although the non-payment of these latter debts did not trouble his conscience in the least. He also spent money freely on vodka. However when it came to sharing household expenses he showed a strong sense of economy. Even a good mathematician would have found it difficult to follow his calculations, the results of which always left him with the smallest share. He liked invitations to coffee, a meal or a pipe of tobacco and if the invitation was not forthcoming he would give a hint by mentioning what a poor devil he was. He greatly valued his popularity with all of us but on the other hand would reject unwanted familiarity. "Who do you think you are," he would say, "coming to me with your twaddle? I don't mix with the likes of you." You see that his character shone in many colours and to this day I could not say which one of them was the dominating one.

The reader might wonder why four so utterly different people started a common household and will be even more astonished to hear that Abel and Kropp went as friends into this establishment, and that Abel actually joined on Kropp's suggestion. Abel had met Kropp in the camp and had introduced himself as a fellow engineer, thus hoping that in cultivating a friendship with such a capable and respected man he would raise his own standing among the others. Kropp had accepted all these attentions in his phlegmatic manner, neither encouraging nor rebuking him. Consequently they spent quite a time together and were regarded as friends. It was under this impression that Koshdan had offered lodgings to the both of them.

Kropp soon became aware that Abel meant little to him, but he found the energy to end this friendship only when he realized that Abel was exploiting him.

Chapter VI

After moving into our cottage we looked for a housekeeper. The policeman who lived two houses away from us recommended his daughter Dunja, sixteen years old. We thought this rather young but he assured us that she was an excellent cook, clean and quite reliable. She was neither pretty nor ugly and did not yet look like a woman. All the same, hardly was she in the house when a rush of visitors began. Many prisoners called on us but they soon disappeared into the kitchen as did the Russian visitors who were not missing either. Sometimes things went so far that we had to use our authority to get rid of them. A lively contest now started between the four of us to gain the favour of our beauty. Abel and Koshdan had much better chances, firstly because they knew more Russian and secondly as married men they seemed to be less inhibited.

All at once Kropp started learning Russian again and because of Dunja, the peculiar friendship between the lanky and the stout came to an end. Abel did not play fair and amongst the other lies that he told Dunja, he also told her that he was the only bachelor of the lot of us. Kropp found this out quickly and at the same time became aware that Abel was spreading rumours about his work.

Bad times began for Abel. We talked as little as possible with him and let him feel our contempt, hoping that he would find our company too unpleasant for him. But we were mistaken and however badly he was treated he always acted as if nothing at all had happened. In the meantime, he had succeeded in turning Dunja against us, but before that we had had our fun and fights with her. Now she did not want any more of it. This opened our eyes and suddenly we realized that she was able to cook only three different dishes, that the house was never clean and that her brothers and sisters were always snooping around. So we treated her differently too, just as a servant. Matters came to a head when we were told by our neighbour, the Russian foreman of the mine, that Dunja was providing her family with our rations. Then we had had enough and gave her notice. She cried with fury for hours and left. To make a clean sweep we asked Abel to leave also and this time he was willing. He moved into the policeman's house where he was received with open arms.

Two days later there was another girl in the house. Manja was a married woman but her husband, a member of the *Red Guards*, was in jail at Omsk. Luck favoured us. She was efficient and clean

and also a beauty, but luck was short lived and lasted only three days. Her husband was set free and she received a letter telling her to meet him in **Savedienje**.

Comment [VAC5]: Cyrillic:
Саведиенэ. Unknown location.

At this stage we were at our wits end and the affair became a nuisance when our own cooking efforts ended in a rather ridiculous disaster. We sat happily talking in our room when suddenly we heard a most disturbing noise in the kitchen. Rushing in, we saw our meal, which Koshdan had prepared in an aluminium pot with a lot of vinegar, sizzling in the fire; kidneys, vinegar and the bottom of the pot.

Kropp and I went to the manager asking him to provide us with carriage and horses as we wanted to look for a girl in the villages. To our greatest astonishment he agreed at once. He was as always very considerate and told us that he had meant to warn us against hiring Dunja as the policeman's whole family was suspected of stealing.

Koshdan and I left the following day. There we were driving down the steep, hazardous mountain through streams and over boulders in the most beautiful weather. An old Tartar invited us in for a cup of tea when we arrived at **Teplorietscka** and while we entered the house the horses were unharnessed and given fodder. Inside we were greeted by ten to twelve men and women every one of whom solemnly shook hands with us. The *samovar* was put on at once and we were soon kindly asked to help ourselves to the *pirogi*¹ (a kind of pastry) which were piled in heaps before us. They were filled with all sorts of palatable things and though they were already dripping with fat, we still had to dip them in melted butter to make the housewife happy. Our cups were filled again and again and protests were of no avail. Eventually we discovered how to stop this overwhelming hospitality and like the Russians we turned our cups upside down.

Comment [VAC6]: Cyrillic:
Теплорьетска. Unknown location.

After the meal we explained the purpose of our visit and it took only five minutes to spread the news around the whole village. Curiosity attracted quite a number of girls but only one wanted the job. She was a small ungainly Tartar woman with a child and we were not astonished to hear that her husband had run away from her. Koshdan was a diplomat and far too cautious to say no, so he took her on, telling her that we call for her on our way back as we

¹ Пирогі – Pirogi are pies eaten throughout Russia, Belarus and the Ukraine that contain either sweet or savoury filling.

still had to look for another girl in the net village. In this way he wanted to avoid coming back empty handed.

Koshdan repeated this method successfully until in the end there were about half a dozen girls who thought they were employed. Fate decided to let us return with two. Leaving Teplorietetscka we went to Savedienje driving at a brisk trot up and down hill under a blue summer sky. Here we were already known and we were kindly invited in by a peasant woman with whom Koshdan had stayed before. She looked after us and our horses well and showed a full understanding of our wants, immediately trying to help us in the search for a suitable maid. Even here, although a much bigger village, everybody knew in the shortest possible time of our visit and its purpose. Besides the girls there were many old women and Tartar lads, the first eagerly interfering in our negotiations and the latter looking on and winking knowingly at us. Koshdan did everything. I only watched and wondered.

He talked to several of the girls who showed interest and took one after the other aside. He stated again that he needed several and left everybody with the belief that they were accepted. Most of them wanted to bring several children who we knew we would have had to feed and whose noise would have filled our house. Also most of them looked dirty and some even rather worn.

But one really pleased us. She was young and pretty and had an intelligent face – Stasha Kotshkinova. She desperately wanted to come with us but was afraid that her father would not allow her to. If that was the case she would simply run away with us. Koshdan felt quite thrilled by this idea, but although I liked the girl I was not in favour of such an adventurous elopement. I knew too well that this would rapidly get us into trouble and so I insisted on the permission of Stasha's father.

In the meantime we would travel on to one more village and have one more try. Should we not find anybody we could at least be sure that four women with about six children were waiting here and as a last reserve there was still one in Teplorietshka. We stayed overnight and in the evening we called on a man whose hospitality I had enjoyed on the trip to Rudnik Andreyevsk. This was the one who had warned me and everything he had said had come true. He was an elderly and distinguished looking man. Astonishingly well educated and intelligent for a peasant, he was the only one in the village who received a newspaper, one from Achinsk which was always a week late. His house was exceptionally clean and well furnished. He shared it with his wife and tall, fair son, the latter

Comment [VAC7]: Cyrillic: Теплориеетсцка. Note three different spellings of this place so far.

looking like an aristocrat amongst the plain people of the village. His wife seemed to take more the place of a servant judging by the way she was treated – here we also had an opulent meal.

The conversation was as lively as our limited Russian permitted. The old man enjoyed talking to foreigners from distant countries that had seen and experienced so much and he sincerely wished us an early return home. He warned us once again of the approaching winter in the mine. I wondered more and more about the fact that he was superior to the other peasants and in the end I asked him about his past. When he answered a melancholy expression came over his fine old face.

He had originally come from the Volga and as a young man he had studied law at the University of Kazan. Like most Russian students he showed a livelier interest in politics than was approved of by the all-powerful police of the Tsar and he was banished to Siberia. Later on he was allowed to settle here when he married. He owned some land and some cattle and also prospected for gold. When I asked him what had become of his legal knowledge he told us that he became so hopeless and depressed through the long years of his banishment that he had taken to drinking heavily. When at last he regained his peace of mind all that was left of his knowledge was a hazy shadow. He had become as dull-witted as a peasant and a peasant he had become. Obviously he brought his son up in a modest and pious way. Europe and the troubled youth of his father was to the boy not more than a story out of a book.

The sky was blue and the larks were singing when we went on our way the next morning. The two of us riding happily along in a light carriage with two horses made a very different picture from the sad trek some time ago into an unknown future. Now the steppe showed itself in its most luxurious growth which the short hot summer produces in Siberia. Tall bushes of flowering peonies in brilliant colours, yellow lilies and many other flowers covered the gentle slopes. Then again a blue sea of short stemmed irises which filled the air with their overpowering fragrance would catch the eye. Insects hummed incessantly.

We jogged along in the usual Russian way, with the baking sun making men and horses drowsy. The horses slowed down and when they came to a shady spot with some succulent grass they left the track to have a few bites of this delicacy. A jolt would put an end to the nap with the wheels ending in a ditch. On it went again with much swearing and whip cracking, first at a gallop, then for a while at a trot until the horses at last slowed down to their

sleepy pace, with the men getting drowsy again and the whole comedy repeating itself.

At last the village appeared in a hollow and all our laziness disappeared. We arrived in Kostino¹ with a wild and noisy gallop. As always we were hospitably received. Our hostess, a fat pregnant peasant woman, (are there ever any peasant women not pregnant in Siberia?) at once invited us to a hearty meal and at the table we explained our mission. She declared that there was no hope of getting a girl in Kostino as women were scarce and far too well treated by the men to think of leaving. This was confirmed by other peasants and so we took ourselves off again with nothing to show for it.

Koshdan swore and grumbled about our vain attempts, "What do I, a miserable old man, need a young and pretty one for?" he said, "as long as she knows how to cook properly and is tidy. I am a man with grey hair and have a wife and children at home. I wish we had taken the hunchback at Teplorietsshka or one of the old women in Savedienje." But ten minutes later, wife and children were forgotten and he was raving about Stasha. He surpassed himself swearing encouragement at the horses and thought himself a devil of a fellow. On the other hand I was more interested in the wonderful scenery and did not take much notice of his ravings.

When we arrived at Savedienje the five or six women who considered themselves employed were already waiting for us. Stasha told us that she had her father's consent provided that her thirteen year old sister, Paladieja, could come too. We were supposed to find work for her in Rudnik Andreyevsk and she was to stay with us and even have her meals with us at first. We agreed to this, but now our problem was to avoid the other women. We spent the night at this place and snuck out of the village at dawn before anybody was up and about. At Teplorietsshka we scarcely dared to look right or left and we stopped only once later at a small farm.

We arrived back towards evening on the third day, well satisfied with our success, for not only did we bring two girls but also ten pounds of bacon, some butter and eggs. Kropp was waiting impatiently for us.

In the beginning with Abel gone all went very smoothly and comfortably in our household. But soon our good intentions formed

¹ Костино, a town now in the Ordzhonikidzevsky administrative division of Khakassia, 100km North-East of Rudnik Andreyevsk.

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from our earlier experiences were forgotten and for a third time a lively but peaceful competition for the favours of our servant began. Stasha however was clever. She led us all a dance and amused herself with the young Russians who appealed to her more. Soon her work also became slack and this confirmed to us our belief that no Russian girl is able to cook more than three kinds of dishes.



A view of the countryside near Kostino, Khakassia

Chapter VII

While all this was going on, the relations between prisoners of war and the management deteriorated. Wages had been fixed at a very low rate and all negotiations for a rise were in vain. Furthermore, Selengoff had declined to pay for a tailor, shoemaker or cook and he was not willing to give any compensation for clothes which, considering the type of work we did, became rags in the shortest possible time. On top of all this frequent irregularities in the supply of provisions occurred.

One day dissatisfaction reached such a point that a great number of the prisoners declined to go on working. But they did not achieve a general understanding nor did they give warning of their intended step to the administration. So it came about that some did not go, others went late and some went as usual.

This procedure caused a great reduction in output and as might have been expected, the management became furious and informed the captain of the militia in Chebaki¹. He arrived two days later and called all those who had stopped work or not started punctually to appear before him. In a speech he pointed out that we were in a state of war in a region of military operations and that any further refusal to work, as well as any incitement, would be punished by shooting and that the missed hours of labour had to be made up. These threats had their effect on the rebellious but already discouraged men. Work was resumed and all were glad that no more serious consequences followed.

In the meantime Kropp and I had given up hope of achieving anything by negotiation, so we decided to take other steps as things could not go on as they were; the main reason for complaining being the fear of the approaching winter. We were absolutely inadequately clad for it as furs, felt boots, warm caps and gloves were necessities. The mine was quite willing to sell us these things but this would have meant paying instalments over six to eight months, at the end of which time all these expensively bought clothes would be nothing but rags. We would be empty handed and with no money in our pockets. How could we ever return to the prisoner of war camp at Achinsk? We would be completely at the mercy of the mine.

¹ Чебаки – A town now in the Shirinsky administrative district of Khakassia, 75km East of Rudnik Andreyevsk.

We decided to write a letter in French to Selengoff. In this we asked for a rise as well as for him to pay the shoemaker, tailor and cook as was promised at the beginning. We threatened that in case of refusal we would stop work at the end of the month. We explained that already, only after the first month, nearly every prisoner of war was already in debt to the mine.

What we had heard of the working conditions of one of the Russians was not without interest for us. His job was sawing timber by hand and this was hard work. He said that he did not know what his earnings were but the accountants who knew how to read and write wrote everything into his book. So far he had not received any money and this man had been working there over a year.

We were rather outspoken in our letter and therefore we were not in the least astonished to receive an unfriendly reply. We were threatened with jail if there were any further irresponsible steps from our side. A detachment of militia, an ensign and twelve men, had been established just about this time. This did not improve our position but it strengthened the director's sense of power. Abel now sided entirely with the latter and as he was still considered an efficient engineer this further undermined our position.

Our daily routine was scarcely affected by all these developments. We got up at 5 o'clock, washed in the kitchen, breakfasted and left at 6 o'clock. The more we saw the chances of better wages fading the less we worked. As the novelty of this type of work still held some interest for me I was not averse to doing a little. I liked to watch the working of the engines or to climb the high power piles while Kropp, sweating and moaning, watched me from below. But his persistence soon won me over. He was against any work at all and so we idled the days away together.

Daily from then on we climbed the 250 feet up to the pit and reached it wet with sweat and bitten by mosquitoes. To look busy we dragged wire and tools up with us, but once there we disappeared quietly into a shady nook in one of the uneven roofs. We were compensated for our exertion by undisturbed rest and the distant beautiful view. As the supervisors avoided the troublesome climb we were secure from them.

Should one have appeared however we would have seen him from far and watched with pleasure how he wiped the sweat from his brow and fought off the mosquitoes. Up there we had an asylum for many a day and there our eyes followed the travelling clouds as we dreamed of our far away home. We went down again punctually for dinner, bunged our tools into a corner and enjoyed

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Stasha's cooking. In the evenings we went for a short walk or played a game of cards, and I also spent many hours sketching. Some of the men had to sit for me, as did Stasha, and though I was tortured by mosquitoes I painted the mountains and forests as mementoes.

Saturday afternoons were free and this was the time for bathing. The bath house was well installed and well heated. All men, Russians and prisoners alike took their bath together. Everybody was cheerful and there was much hilarity.

On fine Sundays we went for trips in the forests or up to the higher peaks around. Of outstanding beauty was a rocky cone-shaped hill which arose in a regular shape out of a base of snow. Once I succeeded in pulling Kropp up there with me and it was hard work not only for him. The view from the top extended around the whole horizon. To the north we saw ranges slowly decreasing in height, while to the south we saw snow covered peak after snow covered peak rising higher and higher towards the central Altai's¹. In the west beyond green valleys and wooded hills lay Kuznetsk, now Stalinsk², famous for its rich ores. Along the horizon in the east the ranges bordering the Yenisei stood out.

Though beautiful as all this was we could not help thinking of the Harz, Thuringen and the Alps. Would we ever roam about there again?

We went downhill again at full speed, Kropp always a hundred yards behind, out of breath, swearing and full of anxiety for his one good suit. What a pleasure it was to run down the steep snowfield. It was real névé³, extending out at the base as the clear green ice of a small glacier, most likely the remainder of a much larger one which formerly covered the valley for miles. Large moraines had been left behind where it receded.

Once we walked to another goldmine in the neighbourhood, Rudnik Ivanov, only two hours away. We passed through luxuriant growth with dazzling colours and to our surprise we founded traces of a bear. The further we left Rudnik Andreyevsk behind, the wider and more inviting became the valleys. A foaming stream accompanied us and at a sudden bend of the track before us on an extensive

Comment [VAC8]: Location unknown.

¹ The Altai Mountains, a mountain range in central Asia, where Russia, China, Mongolia and Kazakhstan come together, and where the rivers Irtysh, Ob and Yenisei have their sources.

² And in fact, now Novokuznetsk!

³ A French word meaning the upper part of a glacier where the snow turns into ice.

plain, framed by steep cliffs sat Rudnik Ivanov. This mine had been closed for years but everything looked more tidily kept and more systematically planned than Rudnik Andreyevsk. This of course was more easily achieved on the flat ground.

A small staff took care of the maintenance and the administration was entrusted to an Austrian prisoner of war. Another prisoner for whom there was hardly any work kept him company. With amusement we watched a detachment of militia drilling with clumsy ancient rifles in civilian clothing. We were treated by the two Austrians to a delicious "kvas¹" and good bread. We returned by a more direct way to take up our lazy life again on the following morning.

As bearable as I have described our life in Rudnik Andreyevsk, we nevertheless found it imperative to leave there before the winter. We therefore wrote a letter to the Swedish Consul explaining precisely our position and entreating him to get us out before the winter. When we had everybody's agreement, except that of Abel who we excluded, we dispatched the letter in three different ways.

Two days later there was a rumour that the management had heard about it, and in fact I was soon called to the warrant officer and asked whether I had written such a letter. He asked to see the draft which I quite willingly brought to him after having quickly added to it that we had been threatened with shooting. This addition had its intended effect and they began to fear me.

Immediately a messenger was sent on horseback to the post office to recover the letters. They actually succeeded with two of them, while the third one reached its destination.

In the evening and already in bed, I suddenly heard a noisy trampling in the passage, and at once I knew what was going to happen. The next moment the *Praporshik*² or warrant officer with three of his men was standing in the room. In one hand he held a lantern and in the other he held a revolver, and his men were armed with heavy antiquated guns. They surrounded me and the officer stated that I was under arrest. "All right", I answered. I had to shift into Koshdan's room where I went to sleep again, quite unperturbed by the guards who had to remain awake all night long. I knew them all well. We had often spoken together and they were good fellows who wished my no harm. In the morning we had breakfast together, again in my room.

¹ (Квас) – Often translated as 'bread drink', a fermented, mildly alcoholic beverage made from rye.

² (Прапорщик) – Ensign.

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Stasha was highly amused but became thoughtful when I told her that they would shoot me. She even became quite sentimental and asked me for her portrait which I had drawn and for some other small souvenirs. All our daily quarrels were forgotten. Shortly before noon I was again called to the *Praporshik*, and in the course of our talk he asked me "How much money do you earn?". After my answer "Twelve *rubles* daily", he said, "I get eight!". That left me speechless. When the statements of all the other prisoners were read to me I learned that none of them except one admitted anything about a letter. Then I was told to be ready for my departure immediately after lunch.

When Kropp heard that I was to be sent away he became furious and hurried off to the manager demanding to be arrested also as he had shared in the drafting of the letter. The manger, polite as always, declared that to his regret he could not oblige him as Kropp had not actually written the letter. Kropp declared that he would stop working at the end of the month and that they could do whatever they liked with him.

I had finished my meal and packed my rucksack and suitcase when the policeman turned up to inspect my luggage. He was the father of Dunja and as he obviously felt most embarrassed, the inspection was rather superficial. I said goodbye to Kropp and a few others and they all entreated me to do everything possible to get them away too.

Chapter VIII

Now everything for my departure was ready. The soldiers took my luggage and we went down over the stream through the whole settlement to the waiting cart. We got in, the driver, the escort and I, and for the second and last time the trip downwards began, in the most beautiful weather. Soon we had left the valley of Rudnik Andreyevsk behind us and though travelling to an uncertain and dim future, I breathed more freely and was able to enjoy the splendour of the landscape. On the way I had ample time to consider the advantages and disadvantages of the whole enterprise and I came to the conclusion that provided of course that no bad end lay in wait for me, I could be quite satisfied.

My main purpose had been to see something of the world and its people, to travel and so to interrupt the monotony of camp life. The months had been uneventful enough and right up until the end adventures were to follow. The escort told me that we were on a two day trip to the same captain of militia who had threatened the striking workers with death. But even that did not worry me much. I had adopted the motto of one of my comrades at the front "God does not forsake a country bumpkin, goddamn he doesn't forsake him." Poor chap, he fell all the same.

We passed through Teplorietsk and reached Savadienje in the evening. Some peasant girls who recognised me greeted me cheerfully and invited me for a cup of tea. Of course they did not realize that I had been arrested. I answered laughingly, "another time." We stopped at the Mayor's house, the horses were unharnessed and we sat down for supper. The Mayor asked why I had been arrested and in reply my escort shrugged and said "He wrote a letter." The Mayor nodded knowingly. "Why does he have to write a letter?"

After the meal it was decided which peasant I would stay with overnight and the village had to provide three men as guards. One of them was armed with the gun of the escort, the second had a rifle as old as the hills and the third had a heavy club. After several fruitless attempts to load the escort's rifle, the handling of which was quite unknown to them, they passed it over to me. I showed them how to load it and to add to the fun I demonstrated the German Army rifle drill. You would have laughed till the tears ran down your face had you seen the old stiff unkempt codgers trying to copy it. A club was more in their line. As soon as I felt tired I went to sleep but my three guards had to remain awake.

Early next morning we started again. This time in a southward direction, further away from the railway and nearer to the Chinese frontier. That day we had to cross a large river by ferry and it was quite an interesting type which we sometimes saw in Siberia. A rope anchored midstream was attached to the ferry in the following manner. Two shorter pieces of rope at each end of the ferry were joined and these in turn were joined to the rope anchored midstream. When the boat was set free from the bank, the current forced it to move on a line of a segment, from the bank to the middle of the river with the anchoring part of the rope upstream from it. Now the ferryman used one of the shorter ropes attached to the boat to bring the boat to an odd angle to main rope. The boat was now pressed upstream by the current to the other bank. This was a very practical method requiring scarcely any labour men and no horses at all.

Once I saw quite a different type on the River Ob¹. There the ferry was moved by paddlewheels driven by a four horse capstan in the centre of the ferry. Four ill-treated horses and two men were required here, whereas in the former instance one man alone was sufficient. In the case of any significant river traffic the rope method could not of course be applied.

After crossing the river we had another two to three hours drive until we arrived at Chebaki, our destination. We drove to the house of the Captain of the Militia, cleaned a bit of the journey's grime from ourselves and entered the anteroom. Soon "his majesty" entered. Through his large horn-rimmed glasses he looked sternly at the young soldier who was so awed that he did not know where to put his limbs.

"Who is this man?"

"A prisoner, Captain."

"Where from?"

"From Rudnik Andreyevsk, Captain."

"What has he done?"

"I do not know, Captain."

Now he turned to me, looking at me over the rim of his glasses. I looked straight into his eyes. He asked me why I had been arrested and I told him as briefly as possible in my wretched Russian the story of the letter. For a while he walked silently up

¹ The Ob, a major river, runs down through Novosibirsk (within 400km of Stalinsk/Novokuznetsk).

and down. Suddenly he turned to me again asking, "Are you a student?". "Yes", I answered.

I was quite startled to see the change in his expression. Severity and sternness gone, the frown between his eyes had disappeared and they showed nothing but kindness and benevolence. His next question was, "Have you had anything to eat?" which I answered with a ready "No." The soldier was dismissed and with an inviting gesture the master of the house showed me into his roomy kitchen where we sat down at a big table. "Palagieya Antonovna," he called, "put on the *samovar*, we have a guest." Soon the tea was ready and I attacked a huge plate of *pirogi* which were put before me. I ate my fill then I turned my cup upside down.

Now the Captain ordered an old Sergeant Major to come in. He was one of the old types with a grey beard and bushy brows, mighty jaw and cheekbones, reminding one of the old Tolstoy. Back in the anteroom I had to undergo a search but nothing suspicious was found. I had however to hand over my belt and braces obviously to prevent me hanging myself. Then the captain inspected the contents of my suitcase. When he had seen the clean towels, underwear, soap and so on, everything tidily packed and had looked through my sketchbook he could not refrain from uttering in astonishment, "These well-to-do prisoners of war," an exclamation which he probably would have suppressed had he thought a moment longer. At the time I found his remark strange but later I came to understand its significance.

Those who fought at the time of the Czar on the Russian front knew how meagre the outfit of the Russian soldier was. And yet, these soldiers with their knapsacks on their backs were still "bourgeois" compared with the Red and White Guards with whom I came in contact on my escape in 1919. These latter travelled thousands of *verst*¹ through the vast country by train, on horseback or on foot, resting at night on the bare floor of a railway station covered only with an overcoat. They no longer had a knapsack but a haversack with a bit of bread, sugar, tea and tobacco as their only possessions. NO pilgrim or mendicant friar had ever lived more poorly. This was certainly the mental picture which caused the Captain's exclamation.

¹ A verst, or versta (верста) is an obsolete Russian unit of length. A single verst measures 3,500 feet, or 1.0668 kilometres. The unit was abandoned in 1924 when the Soviet Union adopted the metric system.

I was allowed to take a piece of soap and towel out of my treasures and then the suitcase was locked and stowed away. Shachmatov, the Sergeant Major, led me to my new quarters. For the first time in my life I entered a prison cell and that was my own. It was square about seven feet each way, with a small broken window. A few poorly fixed iron bars indicated that this window was not meant as an exit but I could easily have pulled them off. The room contained nothing but dirt and I cleaned it with a broom that Shachmatov brought. Then I lay down on the floor waiting for things to happen. But nothing happened. Neither fleas nor bugs came. I could hardly trust my sense. Instead Shachmatov opened the huge lock of the door and invited me to a little chat on his plank bed, which he occupied in the passage while guarding me. The hospitality which the Captain had shown me filled him with confidence. Soon he began to talk about the good old times when the Tsar ("our little father") still ruled the whole of the huge Russian Empire. Now it was divided by the world and had become the playground for a greedy lot of foreigners who had come into the country to exploit it.

Shachmatov came originally from the Caucasus. He seemed however not to long anymore for his far away homeland. He shared this fate with many a public servant and soldier who might have grown up in the far south, where grapes and oranges grow. But the service called him to the cold north so far from home that it was not worthwhile undertaking the long journey during his rare and short leaves. He might never see his paternal home again. Even so, these things were understood and not considered as reasons for complaint.

For Shachmatov the old days represented the time when law and order ruled the country, when on Sundays everyone went devoutly to church and when the authority of the priest and the government were still held in high esteem. Even the old Sergeant Major who now nostalgically remembered the old times had then been looked upon with respect.

Once already the *red wave* had swept over Siberia and only foreign help had restored the old order, although only superficially. But danger was threatening in the west of the Urals¹, as well as in Siberia's forest south of the railway and in the endless steppes to the north of it. The power of Admiral Kolchak's army did not reach to these areas. The farthest post against the red bands in the

¹ The Ural Mountains, a 2,500km mountain range, run North-South through Western Russia.

south was at Chebaki only about 200 kilometres from the Chinese frontier¹ and guerrilla fighting kept the garrison constantly on the move. But not only had law and order gone but also the easy life, when you could buy a loaf of bread for one kopek, as much meat and wonderful fish as you liked, not forgetting the schnapps! But there was still some hope that a Czar might rule again, a father to his old faithful soldiers.

"And now you also have a republic," Shachmatov continued, "Wilhelm is in Holland and there is a civil war in Germany. When will you go home? Why don't they send you back as the war ended long ago?"

Yes, why were we not at home yet? The German government had not made our return a condition of the peace treaty of Brest-Litovsk² for fear of communist propaganda. And why hadn't we gone home on our own? We were so far away, so terribly far, and as well as the distance, hunger, cold and epidemics meant additional threats and handicaps. Besides, where could we get through? In the west there was the red army, in the east the troops of our enemies and an escape to the north or south was blocked by the steppes, the Arctic Ocean and the great mountain ranges.

Thus we sat for a long time talking and smoking until he locked me in again so that he could fetch my evening meal. He brought a dish with boiled eggs, *pirogi*, bread, butter and a big jug with milk. A meal for the gods! The Captain had told him to provide me with everything I wanted at his expense. After tea we went for a stroll on the adjoining meadow to get some fresh air. There Shachmatov showed me the spot where criminals were executed. Thereafter I went to sleep on the floor of my cell, softly bedded on my clear conscience, secure from fleas and bugs and under the protection of my friend Shachmatov.

Nothing of importance happened during the next day. Its monotony was broken only by the visit of some prisoners of war who worked in the village. They brought me some reading matter and a pot of delicious honey. The next morning Shachmatov informed me rather excitedly that I should prepare myself for departure and to come and see the Captain.

¹ The Chinese frontier in 1916 stretched north of existing Mongolian borders, and included the Sayan Mountains which now belong to Russia.

² Signed March 3rd 1918 at Brest-Litovsk (Brest, Belarus), marking Russia's exit from WWI. Civil conflict remained in Russia.

Rudnik Andreyevsk

In his office I met two old acquaintances from the mine, the cashier and the *Praporshik* who had arrested me. There were two circumstances that made me realize that my position was favourable. The cashier, a man of education, sympathized with the communists and he rightly considered us prisoners as victims of the imperialistic and capitalistic war. He sided fully with me and had told me secretly of his hope that the reds would return. My energetic stand against the hated management had pleased him although he himself was a member of it. I could be certain that from him there was no need to fear a damaging statement. He greeted me in a very friendly manner. The *Praporshik* who was completely against me became so intimidated by the presence of the dreaded Captain that he did not dare to open his mouth, especially as he saw that the latter looked favourably upon me and that I myself was without fear.

After a short discussion among the three men a statement was drawn up which the Captain read to me twice. He asked me whether I had any objections to signing it. I had understood only a very little of it but as I was quite convinced of the Captain's fairness and as I did not want to delay my departure any longer, I signed. There followed a short jocular talk in which I once more tried to explain the shortcomings of the working and the management in Rudnik Andreyevsk, and that for us prisoners the extreme climate and the plague of mosquitoes were hardly bearable. The Captain ended this discussion with the laughing remark that on my return to Krasnoyarsk I should ask the Swedish Consul there to forbid the snow to fall and the mosquitoes to bite. With these words I was released.

Shachmatov knew of my sketching and insisted that before leaving I should make a drawing of his shaggy head. In the end I gave in and he sat for me on the veranda of the house of the village clerk. He sat like a statue of granite with a rigid martial expression. Thus he must have looked at a parade of His Majesty the Czar.

Chapter IX

Soon the cart arrived, a typical one-horse peasant cart with a bit of hay in it to make sitting more comfortable. The young coachman looked extremely Tartaric. Saying goodbye to Shachmatov, I gave him my little signed sketch as a keepsake. At the Captain's house the young Tartar was entrusted with a large sealed envelope containing the statement and other papers referring to the affair. On the envelope was nothing to show I was under arrest and it was simply addressed to the Commander of the Achinsk military district. Added to this was a note that in every village I should be provided with a cart, horse and coachman and also accommodation for the night.

The Tartar did not know where to put the clean white document and therefore following my suggestion, handed it over to me. Soon this proved to be of great advantage to me. Even in the next village the Mayor could not know that I was under arrest, when with a flourish I showed him the sealed document. He could not but take me for an important person and with respect, asked me into his house. He hastened to procure the transport, a cart with two horses. I scarcely had to touch my luggage as the coachman took willing care of it and was glad when I entered into conversation with him. And what a conversation we had! With him talking half Tartar, half Russian with an incredibly difficult pronunciation, and I contributing with my very limited Russian vocabulary. But most of the time I was lying or sitting silently in the cart.

It was early in August and the weather was glorious. We passed through beautiful country, the first days through hilly land with winding river valleys from which red mountains rose steeply. There I was a poor miserable prisoner, travelling along as on a holiday trip enjoying with all my heart the blessings with which a peculiar whim of fate had presented me.

My thoughts often dwelled on the beloved ones at home. How little they could imagine my strange adventures! Would they trust their eyes, if they could have just then had a sudden glimpse of me in this situation and still in my grey-green uniform in which I had left them? What ideas would they have of my life? A full year had passed since I last heard from them. Very likely my letters had not reached them either. But much of the time I let myself just drift along without worrying about yesterday or tomorrow.

When after a few days we reached the steppes, the cart moved over soft ground like a boat over a calm sea where no shore was

visible. The villages became more infrequent and more poverty-stricken. Occasionally we met a cart or a solitary rider. Sometimes while I was lying idly on my back looking at the vast blue sky I was disturbed by a deep distant rumble like the surf of the sea. It quickly grew nearer and louder and soon I could see a huge herd of horses stampeding along, driven by a few horsemen. Thousands of hooves made the earth tremble and the galloping herdsmen waved their hats to hurry the horses to a still greater speed. Soon they were gone and with the lengthening distance the rumble became fainter and fainter.

On the evening of the fifth day I reached a village near the railway station of Kladin about 70 miles south of Achinsk. The railway between Achinsk and Minusinsk¹ was constructed during the war and its purpose was to transport ore and grain from the fertile region of the Upper Yenisei to other parts of the empire. During the summer, transport was done by boat on the River Yenisei for Minusinsk about 260 miles north of Krasnoyarsk, where it reached the Trans-Siberian railway. But this communication stopped altogether in the winter when the river was frozen and these parts were completely isolated. The work was mostly done by prisoners of war and was finished except for the laying of the rails, which had been available for only the first 60 miles to the little town of Kladin. The upheaval of war and revolution had made it impossible to bring more rails from other parts of the country to this spot.

Twice a week a short train ran between Kladin and Achinsk to serve the few passengers. Having arrived at Kladin I immediately enquired about the departure of the next train. The answer was, "In two days." To my astonishment I was offered a cart and horses to take me to Achinsk in case I did not want to wait. I accepted gladly as it meant another two and a half days drive in the beautiful season. So off I went again the next morning, with two lively brown horses and a twelve year old coachman.

As I approached the main railway line I came into country which was entirely inhabited by Russians. The next day we came to the River Chulym², a tributary of the Ob on which Achinsk is situated. We passed through a number of villages in the fertile valley of the Chulym. What a contrast to the primitive dirty Tartar settlements. I saw solid and well built peasant houses with carved eaves and window architraves, flowers in the windows and the gardens well

Comment [JR9]: Unknown location. Possibly Kulun very near to Uzbur?

¹ (Минусинск) – a town in the Krasnoyarsk Krai, Southern Siberia. Originally founded in 1739, it marks the center of the Minusinsk Depression between the Kuznetsk Alatau and the Sayan Mountains.

² (Чулым) – an 1,800km long tributary of the Ob.

fenced. The village square was surrounded by the public buildings, the church, the school and the town hall all covered with green painted sheet iron.

In one of the bigger villages we stopped at the town hall, not as before at the Mayor's house. Here the town clerk had to deal with me. On entering the courtyard I saw some soldiers loading old rifles onto carts. My uniform aroused their curiosity and they followed me into the office to ask me questions and to talk to me while I waited for the clerk.

When at last he appeared, the room filled with the smell of schnapps. The soldiers grinned knowingly. The clerk was heavily intoxicated. He had trouble getting to his desk where he tried to write the note necessary for the supply of my transport. But in vain. His pen was scratching along and not one single readable word came out of it. At last he gave up and asked me to do it for him. I performed partly in Russian and partly in German. Thereupon he invited me to visit a friend of his with him, where I would be given something to eat and a glass of good *Nikolaiyevski* would not be lacking either.

Comment [JR10]: Unknown.

One of the soldiers who was to stay in the office offered to keep an eye on my luggage. He had confided to me in a whispered conversation that he was a communist and he heartily abused the bourgeois and expected that only the Bolsheviks would produce any good. He looked a nice handsome boy with a broad friendly face, fair hair and honest blue eyes. Next day I found out that he had put his communism into practice and helped himself to a share of my belongings.

It was very hot and sweat dripped down my face as I accompanied the clerk through the village streets. The good fellow clung to me all the time as if we were bosom friends chattering all the time. A grey haired friendly peasant received us and invited us into the main room. We were hardly seated when the meal was served, beginning with a soup made of beef and beans, eaten following the Russian peasant custom with wooden spoons out of one big common bowl. A roast piglet and delicious white bread came after. The others ate little but kept all the more to the big bottle of *Nikolaiyevski*. The peasant's hospitality towards the clerk could hardly be explained by his friendship alone. He himself was quite sober while he again and again encouraged his guest to one more glass. He was also very willing to oblige with a cart and horses for my further travels.

A village clerk was at that time in Russia an important and influential personality and all official affairs passed through his hands. In order to cultivate his land, the Mayor left all the clerical work to his clerk and it could even happen that the Mayor was illiterate and depended entirely on his clerk. As matters such as taxes, requisitions and conscription were in his hands, good relations with him were naturally of the greatest importance for every peasant. Schnapps and roast piglet would not fail this purpose. I also had a good glassful after the meal.

Soon the cart was ready. We called at the town hall for my slightly reduced luggage and off we went over the Chulym on the highway into the hilly country. From the ridges of the low hills the silver ribbon of the river was visible, at times close by, at times more in the distance. If I had not been driven by a vodka-smelling little peasant whose looks were hardly less rugged than the cart and horses, I would have imagined myself on a pleasure trip in the lovely valley of the Main.

In the evening we reached a still bigger village¹ only eighteen *verst* from Achinsk. I slept at the post station and here near to town the meals were nowhere near as good and I had to pay for them. Next morning when the birds began to sing and the meadows were still glistening with morning dew, the postmaster and I were already on our way driven by two strong fast horses.

We arrived in Achinsk after an hour and a half and stopped in front of the big barracks building. I took my luggage and went into the guard room. The sergeant major was stretched out on the table sleeping, but my entrance woke him. He greeted me in a friendly manner, opened my sealed letter and perused it. Thereupon he called a soldier and ordered him to load his rifle in front of me, all of which left me in no doubt that I was still under arrest. The soldier was told to conduct me to the prisoner of war camp on the outskirts of the town.

As I did not feel like carrying my luggage, I hired a cart which carried me and my guard through the little town. A lively crowd filled the streets. Peasants were driving to the market and many colourfully dressed women with baskets full of flowers and vegetables were making their way there on foot. All the bells were chiming. The sun had at last overcome the morning mist and was shining with its full strength and it made the picture even more

¹ Almost certainly Nazarovo (Назарово), located on the left bank of the Chulym just south of Achinsk. Nazarovo was founded in 1700 by a Cossack named Nazary Patyukov.

cheerful and bright. All this kept me in high spirits in spite of the seemingly unpleasant turn which my affairs had just taken.

The camp looked quite similar to the one in Krasnoyarsk, a typical barren army camp (*voennyj gorodok*¹). There I was handed over to a clerk and kept waiting for about an hour and a half until things began to happen. I was told that the Russian Camp Commander, a very friendly Colonel, had to decide about my immediate future. After a while a German Captain, the senior officer among the prisoners, entered. He questioned me about my circumstances and when the Colonel entered, presented me to him. On the former's guarantee that I would not try to escape, I was allowed to move freely about the camp. When during the discussion with the Colonel I had told him that the reason for my arrest was that I had written a complaint to the Swedish Consul he only remarked, "Why shouldn't he write?"

So I escaped the "*khandelachka*" (prison cell) which was said to be crowded with bugs. Luckily it happened that during this time the camp was visited by the Danish Consul and the representative of the Swedish Red Cross, Elsa Brändström² (later called the Angel of Siberia). They had received one of the three letters. I approached them in the camp and at their request prepared another written report, on the basis of which they actually interfered strongly in favour of the prisoners in Rudnik Andreyevsk.

Thus the outcome of my arrest had become exactly the contrary of Selengoff's intention – I had a pleasant journey to Achinsk at the expense of the government, had been successful on behalf of my fellow prisoners, and was returned five days later to Krasnoyarsk where the journey to the mine had first begun, this time into the officer's camp.

Comment [JR11]: Unknown.

¹ (Военный городок) – Military post.

² Elsa Brändström (March 26 1888 – March 4 1948) was a Swedish philanthropist, notable partly for her work with German POWs in Siberia during WWI.

Rudnik Andreyevsk



Minusinsk Steppe by Vasily Surikov, c. 1873



The Chulym River near Achinsk

Chapter X

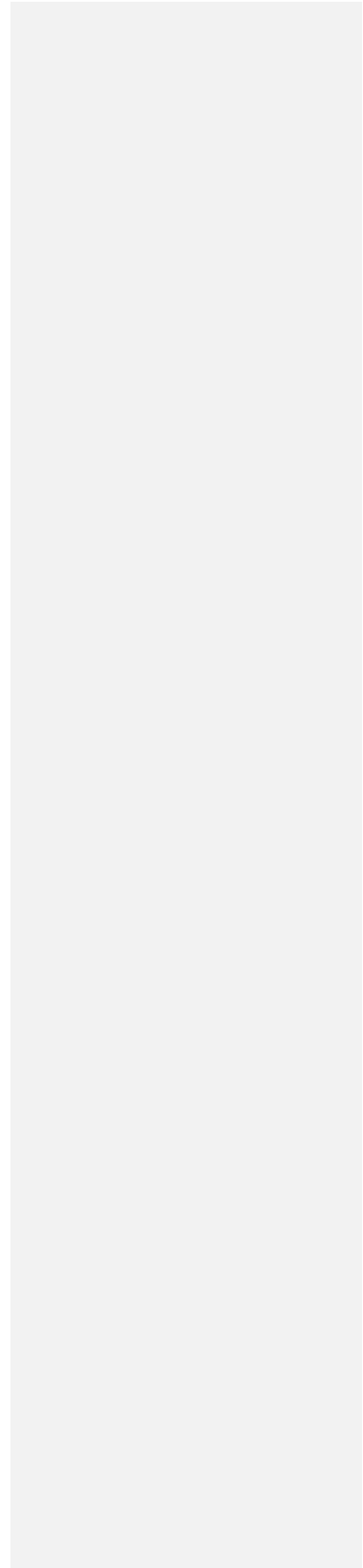
Six weeks later Kropp also returned as a result of a fortunate accident. A Russian locksmith knocked him over the head with a hammer. It was not serious, but it gave him the opportunity to stop work and it was the reason why he was sent away with eight others. Their transport had been less pleasant than mine. Like criminals they were shifted from one arrest cell to the next, to land finally in jail in Krasnoyarsk. Fortunately they were able to inform the Swedish Red Cross of their predicament and through their intervention they were released after five days.

Kropp told me that Stasha left their service soon after I had gone and had found work in the mine. Thereupon the little household was dissolved and Kropp and Koshdan returned to the bug barracks. Though Abel had succeeded in getting a slightly higher position, he earned very little more than a locksmith and the men working under him made his life as unpleasant as possible. Koshdan had fared still worse. Believing that he would earn a lot of money, he had right at the beginning contracted considerable debts in buying an expensive suit and many other things. Yet he earned only eleven *rubles*, a little more than an ordinary miner. The manager had soon realized that he was not fit for the job of foreman.

Kropp and I were fully aware that we had to thank our stars for our early and safe return. Kropp concluded with the words, "once and never again."

Homecoming

HOMEcoming



Journey to Omsk

The journey to Omsk¹ took two days and began under very favourable circumstances. On the 8th of October 1919, thirty of us, all Germans, were walking for the last time along the familiar road through the steppe towards the town. One last glance back to the camp, the scene of years of suffering, and we joyfully started the descent of the steep slope down to the Yenisei and Krasnoyarsk.

Once more our eyes travelled over the river with its many branches and wooded islands, over the town with its many spires to the imposing distant Sayanic Mountains. The splendid dome of the Tagmag on their left awakened the latent homesickness of the Swabian prisoners, who used to compare it with their Hohenstaufen². To the right, the Stolbya³, a group of steep granite outcrops stood out from the wooded range. I had several times climbed them at a period when we prisoners of war had enjoyed greater freedom when the Reds were in power.

About two and a half years had passed since my arrival from Mologa⁴. Looking towards the foothills of the mountains I had yearningly watched the trains of the Trans Siberian railway hundreds of times as it came from Irkutsk⁵ travelling westwards. The hope that one day one of these trains would also carry me had faded more and more as the years dragged on. But now at last a decisive step had been taken and we were to travel quite a way to the west.

We crossed the wooden bridge over the Kacha River⁶, passed through the well known streets and squares, past the cathedral with its colourful domes and arrived at the station. As the train was not due for quite a while I looked up Langfeld, an old comrade of mine who had a good position at the stores. He wanted to do me a

¹ Situated in south-western Siberia, on the confluence of the Irtysh and Om Rivers; Omsk City sits on both branches of the Trans-Siberian Railway.

² Hohenstaufen Mountain, Swabian Alb, Baden-Württemberg, Germany.

³ Stolby rock formations, now part of Stolby National Park, roughly 10km south-west of the city of Krasnoyarsk.

⁴ Mologa (58° 11' 58.8" N, 38° 26' 28.2" E) was a town in the Yaroslavl Oblast (near Moscow). It was flooded in the 1940's during the construction of the Rybinsk Reservoir, which at the time was the largest man-made body of water on Earth. It was very near to where the city of Cherepovets is today.

⁵ Irkutsk City (52°17'N 104°18'E). Irkutsk Oblast neighbours Krasnoyarsk to the East.

⁶ (Кáча) – A 100km long river which runs west and northward of Krasnoyarsk, before ultimately running down through the middle of the city itself and joining with the Yenisei.

Homecoming

favour, so took me to his superior whom he asked to give some provisions for the journey. So I received for us about ten pounds of butter, a great quantity of cheese, ham and sugar, which served us very well during the trip.

Just before the train was due to start the nephew of Baron Gerard, a *Praporshik* still in his teens, conducted us to our *teplushka* into which the thirty of us were packed rather tightly, but it was still bearable. My place on the plank bed was between Gunther Drange from Danzig and Walter Sahn from Konigsberg. Together with these two I had decided on this trip. We had accepted work at a factory in Omsk on the recommendation of the Swedish Red Cross. The owner, we were told, was a Baltic nobleman, Baron Gerard.

It was a peculiar feeling to move straight westwards all the time and to see again all the places which had once separated me from home. One of the stations where we stopped was Novo-Nicolaiyevsk¹. There, I remembered, how an old man on the platform at Easter, 1917, had kissed me on both cheeks with the words, "*Christos voskres!*"², (Christ has risen).

At noon on the second day we reached Omsk. After leaving the train we were naturally expecting to be shown to our living quarters in the town. We were therefore astonished to be told that we still had to wait a little for the arrival of the carts. As a matter of fact we waited for several hours. Not before dusk did they arrive, twenty of them, which of course was much more than needed. Our endless train proceeded through the town with its wooden houses and dirty streets over the huge Irtysh³, until at long last we stopped in full darkness in front of a log-house. The carts were driven through the gate into a spacious yard. We were told to leave the luggage and to make ourselves as comfortable as possible inside. Tea and some food were distributed and soon the *Praporshik* came to bid us goodnight. We now felt pretty sure that our journey was not yet at its end. Rumours, which had already circulated in Krasnoyarsk, that we would be sent to the front against the communists and not to a factory, were now revived.

The Red Army had pushed Admiral Kolchak's troops, which only a few months earlier had their positions on the western bank of the Volga, right to the Urals. There the front had been stable a while.

¹ Founded as Novonikolayevsk in 1893, the city was eventually named Novosibirsk. It is now the 3rd largest city in Russia behind Moscow and St Petersburg.

² (Христос воскрес!) - The Paschal Greeting in Russian.

³ The Irtysh (Иртыш - meaning "White river"), is the main tributary of the Ob.

Homecoming

The Red Army advanced victoriously against the English at Archangel, against Petliura¹ with his Finnish and Baltic troops near Petersburg, and against Denikin's² army of Cossacks and French in the south. These spectacular successes convinced a greater number of Russians all over the country that only Lenin and Trotsky were able to reunite the realm and to get rid of the *condottieri*³ and foreign intruders. Besides, the Communists benefited at that time from the shameless conduct of many of the Kolchak officers and the cruelty of General Gajda⁴ who commanded the Czech troops. Mutinies became frequent in the White Army but were rigorously suppressed.

Slowly, that night, the talking abated and we lay down in the usual way on benches and on the floor. Soon the only remaining noise was that of snoring until we woke in the early morning. We washed at the well, drank tea, looked after the luggage, and the horses were harnessed. Off we went and after a few minutes Omsk had disappeared. Along we went, through pleasant cultivated hilly country with here and there a copse of pines. The sky was of a light blue, the air cool and a slight haze covered the distance. The wide landscape and fresh air cheered us up. On up grades we alighted, gathered in groups, walked beside the carts chatting, glad to be able to warm up our stiff limbs. Sunshine and "wanderlust" even encouraged us to some cheerful singing. As always, the main topic of our discussions was escape. We were twelve hundred kilometres nearer home but there still remained more than three thousand to overcome. In such light hearted moments the mind easily conquered mountains, rivers, wire entanglements and enemy lines. An hour later perhaps, back in the grip of our plight, there seemed to loom only insurmountable difficulties – so we followed the track which like all of its kind was growing wider by the year.

¹ Symon Vasylyovych Petliura (10 May 1879 – 25 May 1926), was a leader of the Ukraine's fight for independence following the Russian Revolution of 1917.

² Anton Ivanovich Denikin (16 December 1872 – 8 August 1947), was Lieutenant General of the Imperial Russian Army in WWI and a leading general of the White Russians during the Revolution.

³ Italian, from *condotta*: troop of mercenaries.

⁴ Radola Gajda (14 February 1892 – 15 April 1948), was a Czech military commander who saw major military successes during the Russian Revolution, fighting with the White movement. After the war he embarked on a political career including the establishment of the Czechoslovakian National Fascist Community.

Homecoming



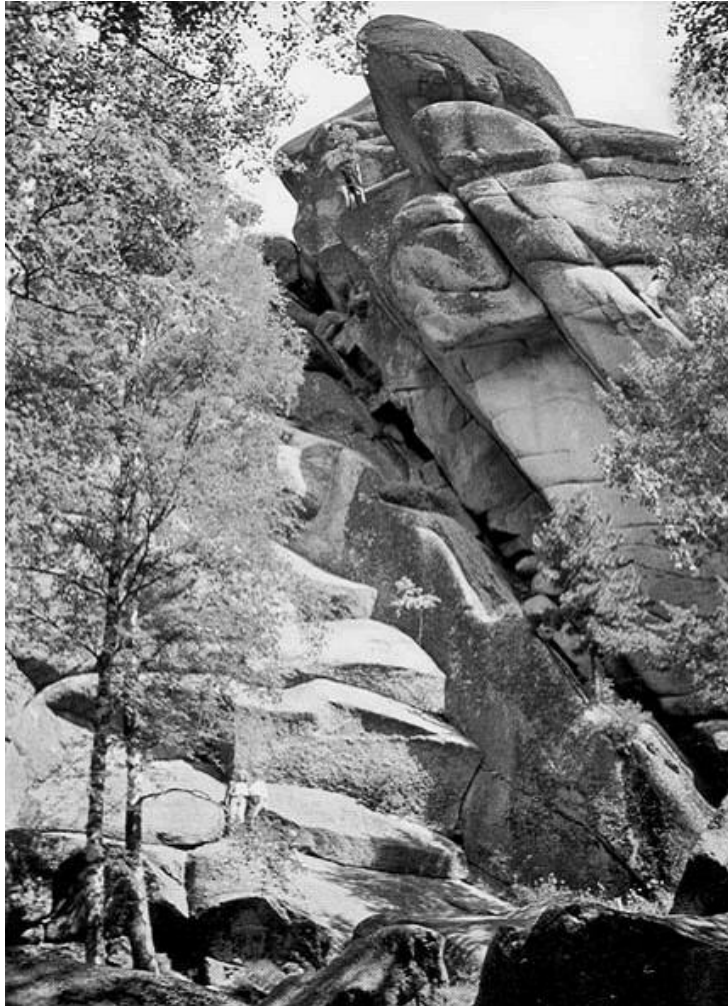
Krestovozdvizhenskij cathedral in Omsk

Homecoming

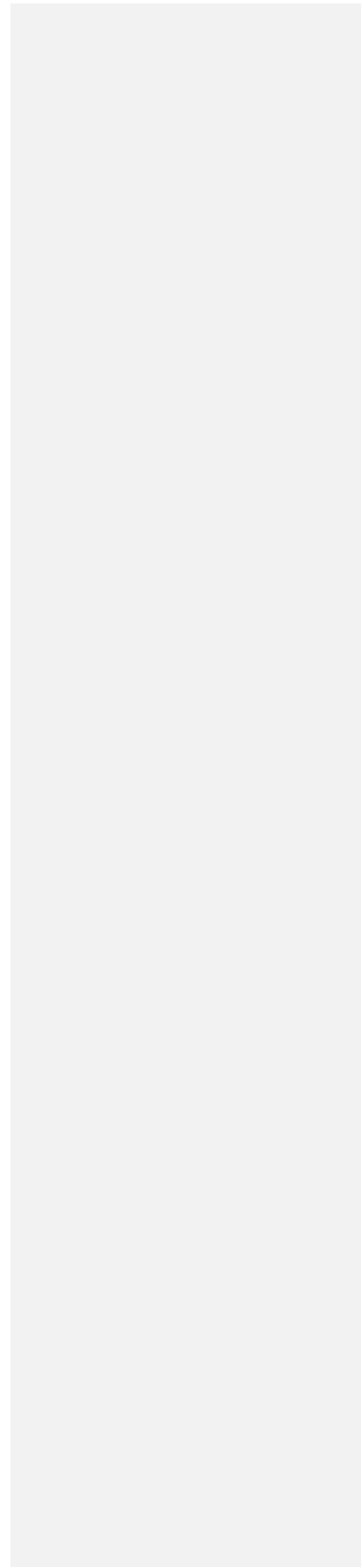


A monastery in the now flooded Mologa, c. 1911.

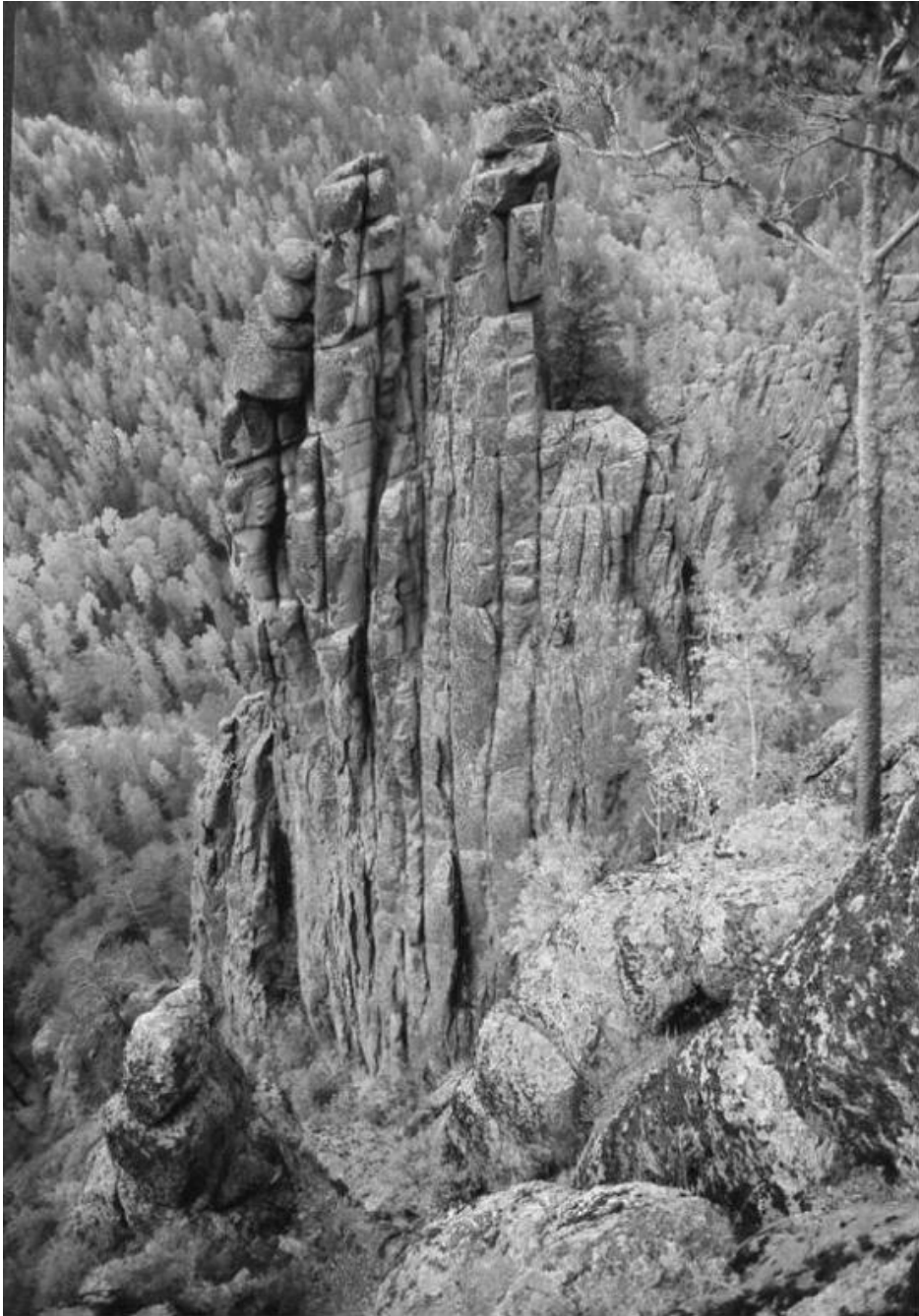
Homecoming



Stolby, near Krasnoyarsk



Homecoming



Stolbya, near Krasnoyarsk

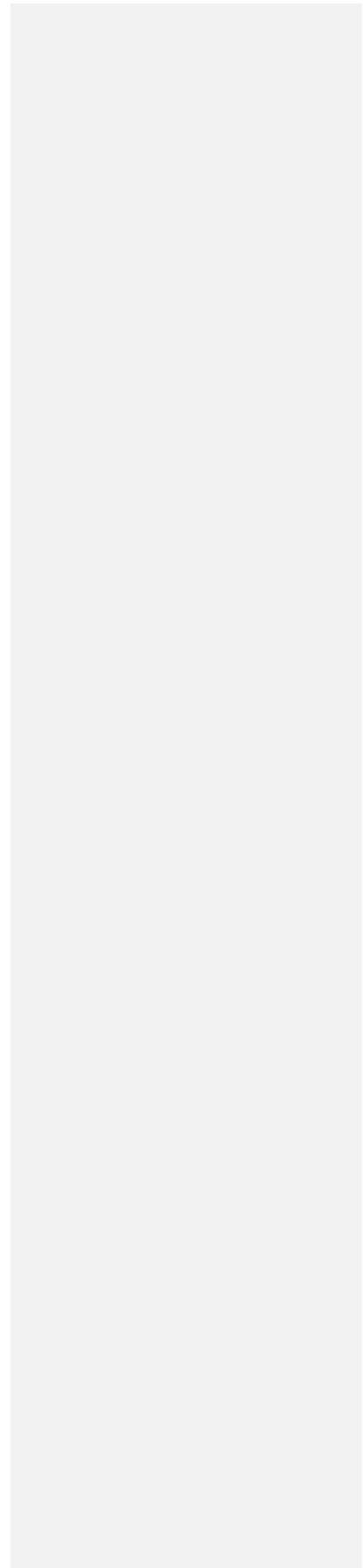
Homecoming



Kacha River, near Krasnoyarsk



1km from the town of Kacha



Novo Archangelsk

We reached the Irtysh again sometime in the afternoon, and crossed the river on one of those huge very practical ferries which are used in Siberia, and were met by our *Praporshik* on the main road of a big village called Novo Archangelsk¹. He was accompanied by a few officers and soldiers. So that was it. The White Army was waiting for us. Where now was the factory of Baron Gerard? Obviously he had not only deceived us but also had the delegate of the Swedish Red Cross, Count Bande. How otherwise could he have recommended our going?

We were asked to form a row and to name our trades in which we were trained. Tailors, boot-makers and carpenters were wanted. Gunther Drange and I reported as carpenters, Sahn as a tailor. Of course none of us had the slightest idea of this work. This done, we were shown to our quarters in the village, grouped according to our trades. Russian soldiers of the so-called Voluntary Regiment of Cavalry to which we now belonged were already billeted in the peasant houses. Drange and I got a place in a house on the main road where we were received in a friendly way by a tall fair peasant woman and her family. We were lucky in that the quartermasters of the regiment were also billeted in this hospitable house. There was therefore an abundance of meat, bread and butter and we emaciated prisoners appreciated this fully and were not shy to eat our fill. We took meals with the family at the kitchen table and I enjoyed the atmosphere of warm intimacy missed for so long. Our hostess was pregnant expecting her confinement very soon and was treated with general consideration. The little girl was everybody's darling.

One of the quartermasters had been a prisoner of war in Germany where he worked several years for a peasant. After the peace of Brest-Litovsk he had returned home, intending to settle his affairs, to spend a short while with his people and then to return to Germany. Alexander, this was his name, spoke German quite well. He enjoyed the opportunity of using his knowledge and told us much about his experiences during the war. He looked upon the time of his captivity as the highlight of his life. There he had had a clean little room to himself with white sheets. He had become engaged and his bride had given him a silver watch. As a Russian peasant he could not have any of these things.

¹ Novoarkhangelka (Новоархангелка) – situated 45km North, North-West of Omsk.

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The new political troubles had prevented his emigration. The White Armies were formed and Alexander had the misfortune to be forced into the so-called "Voluntary Regiment of Baron Gerard", into the train of which we had been pressed. His political leanings had always been to the left but now he became a fanatical communist. Between him and his fellows there was a lot of political talk and I was astonished to hear how much the others shared his views. They competed in cursing their officers and the White Army in general. Once I heard, "If the Reds come, we shall throw the whole bunch of officers into the Irtysh and join the other side." These words must have more or less expressed the mood of the entire Kolchak army. How otherwise could one explain its complete breakdown shortly afterwards? Within a few months the White Army was virtually annihilated, being chased from the Urals along the 5000 kilometre Siberian Railway to the Far East.

After we had settled down we went round to see the others. They were all quite well off, well received by their hosts and had warm and in our views comfortable quarters. Sahn was staying with a tailor and we laughed ourselves silly watching his attempts to master this intricate craft. The boss looked with benevolence upon his new assistants. A simple village tailor; this gave him the rare opportunity of feeling superior. We were curious as to what our own work would be like. On the second day we were shown to our working place. The foreman of the carpenters led us along a little path between some haystacks to a small square, surrounded by trees. There we found the school, a simple white building. Teaching had stopped long ago and so they had installed the joiners workshop in the big bright classrooms. It was equipped with many benches and ample tools and quite a number of men were already at work. The foreman showed us to our benches and gave us tools and timber. I was supposed to make a stool with three legs and for quite a while I looked helplessly at the timber which I was meant to shape into a round seat. My Russian neighbours realised my embarrassment and gave me friendly advice, none of which I understood. The top with the three holes I managed at last but the legs refused to be of equal length. When I shortened the longest it became the shortest and so I worked on to the great amusement of the others until it was time to knock off. There lay my legs on the bench, still unequal and probably already much too short.

Next morning work had hardly started when a troop of cavalry stopped in the square and a thickset coarse-looking officer with a puffed red face commanded, "Dismount." He entered the workshop and asked for the foreman whom he ordered to evacuate the school

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immediately. The foreman objected, the officer in a fury shouted that if the room were not cleared this very minute his men would throw the entire workshop out of the windows. After some more harsh words the foreman asked us to leave with him. We were hardly out of the door when we saw the soldiers carrying benches outside into the snow. I asked the foreman where we would work from now on but he only shrugged.

This was the end of my work in Novo Archangelsk. The remaining fortnight of my stay there was spent entirely as though on holiday. The days passed with eating, sleeping and going for walks. As well I read a voluminous book about health in the home, written by an American doctor, which I had carried all the time with me and which because of its anatomical drawings aroused the curiosity of all the Russians. I also painted a portrait of the little daughter, for my own pleasure and also in order to show my gratitude to our hostess. I succeeded quite well and it was very much admired.

In the meantime winter had really set in. The vast country was deep under snow and on the Irtysh the ice floes were pressing against each other. Its total freezing could be expected any day. We started worrying as to what this winter would do to us. Reports about heavy fighting at Yalutorovsk¹, only 400 kilometres from us, did not let us forget that we were soldiers in the White Army. I occupied myself as so often before with drawing a map, showing the way westward, which to follow in case of escape.

A main highway led from Novo Archangelsk first in a south-westerly direction and then towards the north to the small township of Tyukalinsk². From Alexander we learnt that a German village, Tarlyk³, was situated not far from this highway about 25 kilometres away. This information later proved to be of the greatest value to us.

One day we heard that the fighting at Yalutorovsk had ended with the victory of the Reds who were advancing at great speed. We became very excited. What would we do if the regiment marched to the front or engaged in fighting at the Irtysh? We had not the slightest wish to be involved. Soon the rumour became a certainty. We just happened to be at home and the sixty year old

¹ (Ялүторовск) – 70 kilometers South-West of Tyumen; the first Russian outpost in Siberia.

² (Тюкалинск) – Approximately 75 kilometers North-West of Novo Archangelsk

³ (Тарлык) – A German settlement approximately 35km NW from Novo Archangelsk, and approximately 45km SE from Tyukalinsk. Not to be confused with another German settlement of the same name in the Russian Province of Saratov.

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grandmother who still could not leave men alone was wrestling with the Russians, when suddenly we heard horses and the rattling of carts. We went outside and were struck by an utterly distressing picture of an endless train of fugitives. With their few possessions, in many cases the remnants of comfortable circumstances, laden on all kinds of vehicles, they passed us; women and children on the carriages, the men walking alongside. Sadness and despair showed in every face and expressed itself in loud lament, the crying of the children and the cursing of the men when the train came to a standstill. This began on the afternoon of the second of November and apart from some short intervals continued right through the whole day of the third.

On the night of the third we were suddenly awakened. The quartermasters were ordered to report at once for the issue of provisions and uniforms. The total stores were to be distributed in the morning; the regiment was to be assembled at noon on the main road to begin its retreat in the afternoon. There was no more sleep for Drange and me. As soon as we heard, "The regiment goes back", we both knew that there was no choice and that we had to flee. We visualised a precipitate retreat. If the position became critical we foreigners would be the first left to our fate, which meant starvation and freezing to death. The idea "back east" was unbearable and enabled us to risk anything. First thing in the morning we asked Sahn to escape with us, and then we packed our bare necessities into our rucksacks, leaving the rest of our possessions in our suitcases to our hostess. Very reluctantly I left my painting gear and some of my drawings behind.

To avoid suspicion we left our suitcases in an obvious position. I asked the housewife for some bread. I could only say "bread" but she clearly understood our intentions and I am sure that she sincerely wished us success. As there was no bread in the house she sent her little daughter to her mother next door. She came back with some fine white bread and we put it into our rucksacks which we left in the stable. Now we were ready and we sat down quietly in the room.

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The Dormition Cathedral in Omsk



The Irtysh frozen in winter, near Omsk

Escape on Foot

At half past eleven we arose, left the room without word, fetched our rucksacks and with quick steps followed the footpath along the side of our house. We moved past the school until we reached the church at the edge of the village, where Sahn arrived at the same moment. Silently we shook hands and took a field path leading into the open country. The only living soul whom we met that first day was an old man near the church. After a few hundred steps we left the path to tramp across country through deep snow. We hurried as quickly as possible in order to put a good distance between us and the village with its fateful regiment. The compass was our guide.

After two hours strenuous walking we stopped at a big haystack which gave us shelter for making a cup of tea. We made this with melted snow over a straw fire. We were still wearing our German uniforms. Over it I wore an old Japanese military greatcoat from the Russo-Japanese War¹ and the others wore Russian coats.

We went on refreshed, over bare land, sometimes with and sometimes without a path, but always westward. After a while we were pleased to see the highway not far away. The sad train of fugitives, with only short gaps in it, was still moving eastward. We took the road so that walking would be easier and hardly had we arrived than we were bombarded with the same question again and again. "Is the Irtysh frozen?" It took us a while to understand and still longer until we grasped the importance of this question. Unfortunately we could not tell because we had not been near the river in the last few days.

Suddenly we were shocked to see a marching troop not so far off. To see them, to disappear from the road and to go under cover behind a frozen dung heap a hundred yards away was a matter of a few minutes. After this experience we avoided the road but kept in sight of it so as not to lose the direction of Tyukalinsk.

This was the first of a number of hard days. We suffered from cold and hunger and our clothing made walking awkward. Besides our uniforms and greatcoats we had put on two shirts and a second pair of trousers, nearly everything we possessed. This was not a very suitable marching outfit and despite all these clothes our feet got very cold and very liable to get frostbitten at every rest. Trudging

¹ 8th February 1904 – 5th September 1905. Russia's defeat at the hands of the Japanese forces contributed to the Russian Revolution of 1905.

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along that afternoon in the early dusk we got a glimpse of the highway from time to time and on this ever more troops appeared. We were worried as to where to spend the night. We soon had to abandon our first idea of sleeping under a haystack as it was much too cold. So we had to contemplate going into a village even at the risk of arrest, but all this did not discourage us. That we had dared the escape with all its risks and dangers had restored our self-confidence and self esteem.

We visualised our flight as follows; steady advance westwards, taking care not to fall into the hands of the White troops, which could mean being arrested and being forced back with them, or even being shot. The obvious danger was of being regarded by them as spies or deserters. The rapid advance of the Red Army (it was said that Tyukalinsk was already in their hands) led us to expect that the fighting would pass us in one of the next few days. During that critical time we hoped to hide in some isolated spot. Instinctively, we looked up at the Reds as our friends and took for granted that they would not only leave us in peace but would even send us home. These were moments of great optimism when we calculated in how many weeks we could join our families. We counted in three to four more days until we would be left behind by the red wave. Another few days would bring us to the railway line between Omsk and Ishim¹. From there we would travel without interruption by rail, and would arrive home in perhaps altogether four weeks. We also discussed what we would like for our first dinner at home.

At that time we had not the faintest idea that at the end of 1919², nearly two years after the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, there were still many thousands of prisoners from many countries in European Russia. Not even the slightest steps had been taken to return them to their own countries, although they suffered from hunger, homesickness, frequent maltreatment and succumbed in great numbers to epidemics. The only reason for the retention of prisoners-of-war in Siberia was, as far as we could understand it, the existing fighting front in the Urals. As a result all our energy was directed towards overcoming this obstacle after which our exchange would be immediate.

When darkness set in we approached the highway so that we would not miss the next village. The ceaseless clattering of hooves and

¹ (Ишим) – founded in 1670, situated in southern Tyumen Oblast.

² Ekaterinburg was captured by the Red Army on the 27th of January 1919. Omsk was captured on the 14th of November 1919. The Red forces would have likely captured Tyukalinsk in October.

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the rattling of carts were audible all the time. Soon the lights of a village appeared. We hoped now to enter a house from the rear through the back garden but at the fence the dogs received us with such a furious barking, that without second thought we bolted. Thus, in spite of our fears we had to enter the village by way of the road. It was crowded with soldiers but nobody took the slightest notice of us. We entered the next suitable house. It was packed with Kolchak's men. We bade them a friendly good evening and were answered in the same way. Without asking permission we disposed of overcoats and rucksacks and found ourselves places on the floor as near as possible to the stove. Nobody knew what to make of us in our German uniforms and as three men more or less did not matter, we were tolerated. Slowly we were drawn into conversation. With our poor Russian we tried to explain that as prisoners-of-war we were going to work in a nearby German village. The peasant confirmed the existence of several and did us the favour of describing the exact position of the nearest. By now quite a friendly atmosphere had developed and we were offered some bread and some soup as they had become well aware that hardly any food came out of our rucksacks. When everybody had finished the lamp was extinguished and soon there were no other sounds but those of snoring. After the exhausting day we three slept right through to the early morning, when the noise from the street woke everybody. We drank a cup of tea and left the village as quickly as possible, to take up our journey at some distance from the highway, as on the previous day. The flight of fugitives had come to an end and the increasing number of troops indicated our approach to the front. The day passed very much like the first, with the only difference that we avoided the highway altogether. We dragged ourselves laboriously through the deep snow and when our strength and courage were about to fail, we regained them by painting before our inner eyes exciting scenes of homecoming. At dusk we again approached the road but stopped when we heard the barking of the dogs in a nearby village. We waited in a little copse until it became quite dark before we went on.

A sudden commanding "*Shtoi!*" made us stop dead on the spot. Only now did we become aware of a cart full of soldiers quite near on a field path and beside them a guard aiming his rifle at us. A second call asked us to come out. I did so, but I saw to my dismay that Sahn and Drange were on the point of running away. I called them energetically, knowing well that an attempt to escape would be just the thing to arouse suspicion. Fortunately they had enough common sense to desist. As usual I had to be the speaker, the one-eyed among the blind. On the cart were a number of officers,

Comment [J13]: Стой?

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probably the staff of a regiment who had lost their way and had sent out a patrol to find their bearings.

"Who are you?" we were asked.

"German officers. P.O.W."

"What are you doing here?"

"We are on our way to our working place."

"Show your papers."

We gave them Drange's identity card with his photo from the camp in Krasnoyarsk. One of the officers struck a match and in the poor light he was just able to make out the word "*Poruchik*" (Lieutenant). As soon as this was seen everything was all right. The idea that a German Lieutenant could belong to the Red Army obviously did not exist. We were released and quickly disappeared into the dark.

A few minutes later we turned up in the village's street and as the evening before, but with more confidence, entered a peasant house. The night passed like the first. We were told that quite nearby a small road branched off leading to the 7 miles distant village, Tarlyk. The whole village was brimming with excitement caused by the recurrent rumours of the pending arrival of the Reds.

We started very early the next morning. An icy wind blew the snow mixed with dust over the ground. We were met with curious looks but nobody stopped us. We soon came to the branch road which we followed in a northerly direction. The biting wind became worse and really dangerous. Drange's right cheek froze and so did one of my big toes, which I found later to be quite bloodshot. But though we were already rather exhausted, the initial success and the hope of finding the much needed hiding place in Tarlyk gave us the strength to go on.

Tarlyk

At last we managed to put the steppe with its frozen ground and stunted birch forest behind us. Now we met fields and paddocks remarkably well fenced and soon the first houses came in sight. They were not log houses but built of adobe with shingled roofs and painted windows. We passed several without daring to accost anybody or to knock at a door. In the end we gained enough courage and knocked at one of the best houses.

A little grandmother opened the door to a small hall and regarded us with obvious distrust. We addressed her in German, told her who we were, that we were on our way back home and asked her permission to enter. She did not seem very happy about letting us in but nevertheless did not refuse. The room was a surprise. Ceiling and walls were whitewashed; the floor was of carefully smoothed clay, everything being quite different from a Russian peasant room. Besides the old woman there were her three grandchildren aged six, five and three years. Soon we were sat around a table, each with a beaker of coffee and plate of sliced bread and some brown jam before us, coffee and jam both made of turnips. Enthusiastically we drank the hot beverage which though not good was at least German. Soon the housewife arrived, a tall blue-eyed fair woman with a delicate complexion. She welcomed us in a much more friendly way than the suspicious grandmother. From her we learnt that her husband together with some other peasants of the village had been forced that morning by the Whites to supply transport of horses and carts. His return was uncertain and she was very worried. We were quite aware that our presence must increase her anxiety. We were doubtful characters to both sides and could mean harm to any family which gave us shelter. But our position was too difficult and we were too tired to move on and were glad to have a roof over our heads. While we were talking with the mother, the grandmother was continually finding fault with the children, suppressing the slightest outbreak of mirth with quotations from the bible.

A few hours later a snow covered man passed the window. Our hostess rushed to the door and a moment later her husband stood in the room. He greeted us in a frank and friendly way, asked about our circumstances and said, "May the way home be open for you." In the end he advised us to stay a few days with him as there was fighting nearby and we could run into danger. We were only too glad to accept. The man told us how he had been ordered out of bed during the night, and then had been forced to harness

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his horses and to drive to the same village where we had spent the previous night. From there he was supposed to join a regimental train moving eastward. This might have meant no returning home so he decided to gallop away the moment he felt unobserved. He succeeded and remained hidden in a forest throughout the morning. Only now had he dared to come home, leaving the horses and the cart still among the birches, to be able to show an empty stable in case of another requisition.

While the wife was still busy preparing dinner the young farmhand arrived with fresh news. In the morning at about 8 o'clock the big village on the highway had been completely surrounded by the Red troops. The entire infantry regiment No. 33 had been captured after very little shooting and we would have been among them had we not started so early. We might have been considered foreign combatants and been executed.

We sat eating and talking with the family. When the night was setting in new trouble arose. A boy sent by the mayor brought the order to appear straight away with cart and two horses at the church. The White Army was still requisitioning transport. Our host asked me to lend him my precious white hare fur cap which I had sewn myself. He wanted to be less recognizable in case he met the soldiers who had commandeered him during the night. He compensated me with his shabby lamb fur cap. His wife felt very uneasy and we too felt uncomfortable, understanding her anxiety. We all sat there in fear waiting to hear another knock at the door or window at any moment. Later on the lad spread some furs and blankets on the floor for us to sleep on and we were bedded more softly than for a long time. But sleep would not come as we could not stop listening in the darkness and only when the peasant returned about midnight did we fall asleep.

At daybreak someone knocked noisily against the window. The wife went to look but as she could not understand a word of what she was told, her husband had to show himself – just what he had tried to avoid. This time it was a Red patrol that the poor man had to serve with his horses and cart, and off he went adorned with my white cap. We spent the morning in a gloomy and depressed mood.

The wife told us about the history and conditions of the village. The immigration from Germany had taken place about 200 years ago. At the time many families of the "Herrnhuter"¹ (a Protestant sect)

¹ The Moravian Church or *Herrnhuter Brüdergemeine* is an Evangelical Protestant (Brethren) denomination which originated in the 14th century in Bohemia.

Homecoming

communities in Silesia¹ moved to the Volga where ample and excellent land was given to them – enough for each family to cultivate a big farm. Through their careful husbandry they became quite wealthy. Eventually the community grew to such an extent that the younger sons could no longer possess land of their own. From time to time when the pressure became acute, a number of young families migrated to the virgin land of Siberia. There again land was given to them in a most fertile plain and they founded new closed religious communities².

Thus emigrants from the province of Samara³ had established Tarlyk about 30 years ago. It was named after the many birch woods in the part of the province of Tobolsk⁴. They themselves called it by the German name "Laub" (foliage), the Tartar word for which is *Tarlyk*. The population remained purely German and kept rigidly to the constitution of an evangelic fraternity. No Russian or adherent of any other denomination lived or worked there, nor had any girl of the village ever married a Russian. Some of the young men however had left for their old mother country or America. Before the war, the people of Tarlyk had still received letters from their sons which gave them vague ideas of these far away countries, but since the outbreak of war they had been completely cut off. They took no part in politics and were glad to be on reasonable terms with the government and the Russians. Though they were fully conscious of being pure German because of their descent, language, religion and culture, they possessed no patriotism for the German Empire and had no liking for the Emperor. A narrow minded sectarianism governed the community and family. Their isolation was a permanent source of internal quarrels, denunciations and envy. That was the picture of brotherhood that our hostess drew for us. The men of Tarlyk spoke Russian not much better than we and the women hardly at all as they never mixed with the Russians. The German spoken in this village was a Silesian dialect which had obviously changed as little as the religious customs in the last 200 years.

¹ An historical region of Central Europe, located mostly in present day Poland, with parts in the Czech Republic and Germany.

² The Volga Germans were ethnic Germans living in southern European Russia who maintained German culture, language, traditions and churches. They had immigrated to Russia after manifestos published by Catherine the Great invited Europeans to come and farm on Russian lands while maintaining their language and culture. (Catherine II was a German native).

³ Samara is one of the largest cities in Russia, situated on the Volga, with a rich history of trade and industry.

⁴ The city of Tobolsk sits on the Irtysh, and was once a former capital of Siberia.

Homecoming

The peasant returned during the day. My beautiful cap was gone. Instead he wore another one of shabby lamb fur and mine now adorned the head of a Red soldier whose envy it had aroused. I preferred to keep his, trusting it had no lice. Not wishing to be too much of a burden we offered him our help. He had work for only two the next day but the third could help a friend of his slaughter a pig. I accepted the last without the slightest idea of what I was letting myself in for. After breakfast he friend called for me. He acted as the butcher for the village. His house was much smaller than ours but of the same construction, and inside it was less tidy and clean. The woman was a Crimean German and was dark and spoke Swabian dialect. I did not find out what had brought her to Tarlyk.

An old sow of 310 pounds was to be slaughtered. The man had already sharpened his knife and gone outside when his wife started to heat a big vessel of water. I had hoped that the work would be done under roof but I was called outside. There was the butcher in the deep snow, hardly able to hold the squealing sow which he had gripped by the ears. He told me to get its hind legs, lift them and throw it on its back. The next second found the three of us rolling in the snow in an embittered wrestling match. I got furious with the beast for not wanting to remain on its back and twisted its legs around each other like a screw. The man struck with his knife, the pig squealed terribly and in its pain gained new strength. The blood squirted in a big jet and stank terribly and splashed over the snow and us. I felt quite sick. The butcher had to strike again and again until at long last the animal lay still. It had lost the greater part of its blood; we recovered the rest. Slaughtering a pig? Never again!

The battle over, the cold made itself painfully felt. The women brought the hot water for scalding, but it was not nearly hot enough and her husband was furious. From this moment on they bickered constantly. The knives were not sharp enough either. I took one to help with the scraping. Again and again we had to dip our hands into the water to keep them from getting frozen stiff. It took a long time until finally the carcass was hung and we could enter the warm room. We washed our hands as well as possible and cleaned the blood off our clothes. I was glad that the promised "*Metzelsuppe*" (a soup made with the blood of the pig) was not ready; the smell was too much. I am quite sure that I could not have swallowed one single spoonful. During the scant meal the butcher went on grumbling. It was most embarrassing and I was glad to leave soon after.

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I had caught a cold and felt feverish in the evening, so I lay on the sofa and covered myself well. Later on three men of the Red Army were billeted in the house. The peasant told them that we were working for him. His wife made up a bed for me in a small spare room. There I rested all the next day while Sahn and Drange spent the time peacefully with the soldiers, until they left in the evening. We were now of the opinion that the Red wave had passed and decided to leave the next morning, assuming that my temperature would be back to normal. The peasant told us that the distance to the nearest station on the line Omsk to Tyumen was only 35 kilometres away and described the route. We took it for granted that the trains were running and hoped to travel as stowaways. I asked the grandmother whether they had a map of the country. At first she did not understand, but suddenly thought that she had got it, climbed onto a chair and took a book off the shelf. She opened it, beamed and showed me a map of the Promised Land. It was a book about the biblical prophecies. She was astounded that it was of no use to us.

On The Move Again

The next morning our hosts sent us on our way with some provisions and their best wishes. We expressed our heartfelt thanks to the couple, stepped out into the snow and started off vigorously along the described direction. Now once more all obstacles seemed to have been overcome and we resumed our calculations as to when we would arrive home. After a while I realised that the fever of the day before had weakened me, because tramping in the deep snow wore me out quickly. We had to slow down. Drange growled and did not want to wait. He actually went on ahead but Sahn stayed with me. Before long, Drange was with us again. From that moment on the two began quarrelling. I tried to preserve the peace. We passed through some villages which were inhabited by Ukrainians. The Russians called them "Chachli", which funny as it may seem, they also applied to themselves. Their houses were built of adobe, half sunk into the ground and covered with brushwood. We entered whenever thirst or cold forced us to. The inside of these cottages presented a sad picture. Small iron stoves instead of the big masonry ones; half the room filled with firewood and not even a *samovar*. They prepared the tea in the "*chainik*"¹ (teapot) on the stove i.e. the tea which we gave them, for in their poverty they had gotten used to drinking their "tea" without tea.

Comment [J14]: Not sure about this.

On the way we met Red troops. The infantry marched in single file, from the military point of view a poor sight. Nobody bothered about us, except that we were asked "How far is it to the front?" We answered "Very, very far." After some 20 kilometres we reached a village on a bare hill. It was already late in the afternoon; the wind was biting and had piled big snowdrifts along the road. We decided to stop and asked in one of the houses to spend the night. We were just preparing our tea in the "*chainik*", when we were startled by sudden tramping and voices outside. Instantly the room was filled with a crowd of soldiers with friendly greetings for the owners and us. They too spent the night. We were of course asked the usual questions, "from where to where?" When we answered "From Omsk." they wanted to know whether Omsk had already been taken, which we could not answer. They did not like the speed of the White retreat. The long marches were a great strain on their feet. The cold, lack of food and other privations were sufferings that we shared with the Red

¹ (чайник) – teakettle.

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"*Tovarishch*¹" (comrades), only that our road pointed toward the west, theirs toward the east. We told them that we were on our way home, happy to have escaped the Whites, and that we were convinced that the communists would send us to Germany from the next big railway junction. They listened sympathetically and agreed there was no doubt about it.

An officer entered. He was an energetic looking man, about 40 years of age, dressed like the soldiers in a brown overcoat, felt boots, lambskin cap, without any distinction of rank. He was obviously inspecting the billets. The soldiers did not rise and also called him "*Tovarishch*". As soon as he saw us he asked who we were and we had to repeat our story. When we mentioned our expectation to be sent home he only shook his head and we understood that he did not share our belief. Afterwards the soldiers spoke of him as The General. Since he had left us in peace we assumed that we had nothing to fear from the Reds, but a new worry arose. We learnt that he Kolchak money, the only we had, was out of circulation.

The next morning found us on our way to the station. Again we battled the cold and the frozen ground. After two hours we reached the station. Our excitement was at its peak. The buildings were undamaged but there was a dead silence. There was, at least, a stationmaster. I entered and asked him when the next train to Ishim was due. He looked astonished: "Don't you know that the railway is not working?" It was damaged and in a few days time a trial trip would be made. Upon further questioning he told me that the distance to Ishim was about 210 kilometres, and that the best way to reach it by foot would be to follow the railway line. Since our provisions were exhausted, I found the courage to ask him for some bread. He gave us a few slices. This was our first outright begging. There followed many more. Now we began our long march along the railway tracks, stepping from sleeper to sleeper. At the beginning they were not slippery but a cutting wind whistled over the embankment. We had a distant view over the snow covered plain, with innumerable frozen puddles, bare hedges, rutted tracks and occasionally a village. A depressing sight and a depressing thought having to toil over 210 kilometres with empty bags and empty purses. In the distance we saw Russians and soon realised that we were not the only ones trudging along the line. During those days we met many "White" prisoners. We overtook some and others overtook us. They were simply sent westwards

¹ (Товарищ) – comrade, friend, colleague or ally.

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beyond the Red lines and left to fend for themselves as best they could. When they arrived at a town they were gathered into bigger groups and went on in stages. After a short period of leave they were recruited again and from then on fought in the Red Army. The fate of the main body of the Kolchak's however, which was captured in large numbers further east, was far more tragic. At a later date we were told that in Novo-Nikolayevsk (Novosibirsk) 60,000 of them succumbed to typhus.

We joined none of these Russians as we realised that it was not advisable for more than three to beg hospitality for the night. In comparison with them, we old prisoners felt like free men and funnily enough we found the same attitude among the Russians, even the officials. They granted us the same rights and liberties as the Russian citizens enjoyed within the narrow limits dictated by the new regime. Thus for a number of days we kept going, frozen stiff and weak with hunger. On top of this Drange and Sahn quarrelled more and more often and the march became real torture.

We found shelter in the signalmen's huts. Here we spent the nights fully dressed on the floor, tormented by all kinds of vermin and by the cold. We were glad when the poor starving people could spare us a few potatoes. In the evenings the Russians used to leave the line to find quarters in a nearby village where they were most likely better off. But fanaticism forbade us to deviate in the least from the shortest route and kept us on our hunger-path. We were also hoping for the trial train to pass at any moment and that the regular service would follow immediately after. In this way about seven days went by. From switch to switch we counted the kilometres that we had travelled each day. To our dismay they became less and less. Sahn had bad pains in one knee and Drange suffered from a sore foot. Now I was the only one who could have covered greater distances.

At last we reached a small township. It had the well known domed churches and the green iron roofs on the larger buildings. It took only a few minutes from the station to the spacious market square. This was surrounded by low houses. It was Sunday! The closed shops and general quietness told us this. We had lost count of the days! We enjoyed the warmth of the sun in the sheltered streets in contrast to the icy wind on the embankment. For a long time we wandered through the empty streets, until we dared enter one of the better houses. A young woman received us with obvious apprehension but she did not dare refuse us and so we entered her clean, well-kept room, put our bags and coats on the white

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scrubbed floor and lay down for a rest. By telling her in our poor Russian about our escape and all our difficulties, we tried to dispel her distrust. We explained that we would like to spend a day to recover, asked her where we could buy some food and whether she would cook it for us. Through the open door we saw a baby in its cradle. I was sent to buy some provisions. It took me a long time in the deserted streets until I met a human being, a pretty girl in her Sunday outfit. She took me along to a house where I could buy some bread. The people there were very friendly. They accepted Kolchak money and sold me two big loaves and a big sausage. Triumphantly I returned with my treasures which were greatly admired.

Reluctantly we resumed our march the next morning. It had become still colder, the wind more cutting and the sleepers more slippery. That could not be helped; we had to go on, although at first our legs would hardly obey us and our progress was very slow. We were stumbling and slithering along, when a sudden fright sent us flying into the snow. It was the trial train which approached with a terrific roar. Painfully we clambered back onto the rails, full of new hope. But the same evening we were disillusioned. The signalman with whom we stayed the night knew that the line would not be ready for regular traffic for quite a while.

The next day brought the usual ordeal. Towards dusk we saw four Russians ahead of us. They entered the next cabin, which we had made our goal for the day. We had already resigned ourselves to another five kilometres when they came out again. Though it seemed futile to seek refuge where even the Russians had been refused, we decided to try all the same. The idea of another 5 kilometres was too bitter. There was only a fat woman who we asked modestly whether we could warm ourselves by the stove and could she make us some tea. Her curiosity was aroused and as so often before we had to tell our story. She now invited us to sit down and placed the *samovar* in front of us. "Just now I sent some Russians away. I can't stand them." She remarked. We only understood this when she told us she was Polish. We Germans were looked upon as friends – also by her husband, who soon came home. They invited us to share their meal. Out of a huge pot she served a delicious steaming cabbage soup with plenty of bits of beef floating in it. It was a feast. What a wonderful feeling for once to be fed and warm. That night we slept on a large table, where it was warmer than the floor.

Two days later at about noon we arrived at a big village. It was full of soldiers. So was the house which we entered at random. The

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owner therefore did not want to take us. But we were hardened by now, just stepped into the parlour, which was still empty and settled down. The room did not look homely but had a big stove, in which we at once made a fire. Then I went shopping to spend the last of our Kolchak money. For a long time I tried in vain to get bread or potatoes. After much begging, a peasant sold me for a little money a big hunk (14 pounds) of frozen meat which he chopped off with an axe. Sahn and Drange were delighted with my purchase. They usually returned empty handed. The soldiers lent us a pot and gave us some onions but salt was not available. They also had to go without. The meat took a few hours to thaw before we could cut it into cubes. It was night before we could eat. We ate that unsalted meat that evening and all of the next day, by which time we were almost sick with disgust. In between we slept. Somewhat strengthened, we marched on the next day to suffer again from cold and hunger.

The landscape now began to change slowly. Some small wooded hills appeared. The country became more and more undulating until at last the railway wound its way through a low mountain range. The sight of the forest under deep snow was a real comfort after the desolate plain which we had left behind. After a few more days we reached a high point from which we looked down on another vast plain. A river meandered through it and the line crossed it by a huge gracefully shaped bridge to enter immediately a bigger township – Ishim. We had a short rest in a signalman's hut and hoped to reach it still the same evening. But the distance proved to be greater and our strength less than we had anticipated. In addition the snow was deep on this western slope. We decided therefore to leave the railway halfway to find accommodation in a nearby village. It was nearly night when we arrived and instead of finding hospitality easily, it happened here for the first time in Russia that we asked in vain. It was late when we found at last three different places. The reason for abandoning the old sacred Russian tradition of hospitality was the excuse of billeting and the frequency of marauders, which had impoverished and embittered the peasants.

Before noon the next day we were at the bridge and were prevented from crossing it by an armed guard. That meant climbing down the steep ice-coated bank. To the loud amusement of the guard we arrived at the bottom much more quickly than we had bargained for. But the real fun started when we crossed the Ishim. The wind had swept the snow away and now swept us over the polished ice. There was no hope of going straight across. Only

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after much sliding and stumbling did we reach the other side, much further down the river. Still it took us only a short time to get to the station. We had the feeling that after all our sufferings and exploits we should have been met by a reception committee, but only suspicious guards took notice of us. We were impatient to know our chances and went at once to the stationmaster's office. We were told that there was one train daily to Yekaterinburg which we could use with a permit, issued by the military commissar of the town. We were allowed to leave our bags in his room and, considerably sobered; we took the long, straight and dirty road into town.



Ishim, c. 1915

Ishim

As we were walking along full of doubts, a dapper little gentleman suddenly addressed us in German. He had of course recognised us as "*plenniks*¹" (P.O.W.s). We made ourselves acquainted. His name was "Am Ende" (At the End). He was a German internee and had lived for years with his wife and children in Ishim. His Russian was perfect after many years in the country. We felt that he was not only able to help us but really wished to, admitting at the same time frankly that in return he counted on some help from us. He made it at once clear that there was no hope of our departure in the very near future. We were stunned when he told us that we could find lodgings and some poor food at the P.O.W. camp which was now open. A P.O.W. camp in Ishim! That meant that there were still a great number of prisoners not exchanged and all our ideas about immediate return were illusory.

"Am Ende" tried to cheer us up. He hoped to get passports for us and was willing to lend us money if we would assist him in getting away with his wife and children. He took us to the earth barracks, a rundown, miserable place, the kind we had hoped to never to enter again. Before leaving us he gave us some money because by now we were penniless. Our names were entered into a list which entitled us to some doughy brown bread, cabbage soup with three pieces of cabbage in it, or fish soup in which only some fish eyes were swimming.

After a week we could not endure this life any longer. In retrospect the days of our march did not appear as painful as the present. Then we had suffered only physically but had felt free men. The conditions here though would soon wear down our morale. And so we determined to push on again by train or on foot, with or without Am Ende. He had all the time tried to arrange our departure. When at last he was admitted to the war commissar, he learnt that he was a few days late. The passports were now issued by the "*Cheka*²" – the political police.

The *Cheka* were already then an ill-famed institution. We had to go there personally, and went with bad forebodings. We were announced and after a remarkably short time were shown into the office of the president. The office occupied a confiscated "better" private apartment, still with its old fashioned tasteless furniture.

¹ (пленник) – captives, POWs.

² (ЧК) – The Soviet state security organization created by Vladimir Lenin.

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The dreaded almighty received us in a small room. He was a youngish man, dark and with a poignant expression. Am Ende explained the purpose of our coming and we breathed more easily when we realised that we were neither met with astonishment, anger nor suspicion. He called in a clerk right away who at once wrote out a "propush" for each of us, in which the place of destination was left open. This done, we were asked where we wanted to go. We looked at each other. This was critical. At last we thought: "rather a sparrow in the hand than a pigeon on the roof". We were afraid that if we asked for too much, we might not get anything and so we decided on Yekaterinburg. He entered the word into the passport and dismissed us. The whole affair took hardly more than five minutes. Permission with free travelling as far as Yekaterinburg was far more than we had hoped for, and yet less than we would have liked. Someone said of course, "What asses we were not to have said Petrograd¹."

We spent another two days at Ishim as Am Ende needed them for his preparations. These included getting a special wagon for his family, us and his household. A *teplushka* was actually put at his disposal which, however, had also to serve 30 Hungarians. For two days we strolled about and visited a few Germans. One evening we spent with a pharmacist, an elderly former German. He was very unhappy. The dispossession of his house and business was only a matter of a few days, until the Ishim soviet had found a communist successor. The old gentleman sold me his entire whole of insecticide for a trifle. It was very good and served me well in the camp and also later against lice, fleas and bedbugs, though its use made my eyes water. At the pharmacist's place that evening there were some other German visitors. The talk generally was of flight. Only one, a young man named Rot, believed that by insisting on his rights he would be repatriated and therefore declined to flee. I encountered him again later but never felt sure whether it was in fact or a delirium. One of those evenings I visited a German who earned his living by making sausages. He lived contentedly with a Russian woman in one small room. He nursed already their second child and was in no hurry to return. While we were chatting at tea, she remarked that surely I had never lived with a Russian woman; otherwise I would speak the language much better as she would have taught me. I left them with their best wishes and a big sausage.

Comment [J15]: Assume this means passport, but can't find a translation.

¹ St Petersburg.

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Am Ende lent us some money against promissory notes made out in German Marks (I never found an opportunity to pay him back). When we heard that the *teplushka* for us and the Hungarians was prepared, we were ready and made our way to the station, helping Am Ende with his numerous trunks and boxes. The little plump Mrs. Am Ende carried her two-year old girl (she was born in internment) while the boy, who had been a baby when they were exiled from Warsaw to Siberia, walked beside her.

The Hungarians were waiting at the station. The family Am Ende were the first to enter. After they had arranged themselves with our help in reasonable comfort, we others followed. For us there was little room and we had to double up our legs. Firewood was procured and the stove was soon glowing red. Its radiation and the smell of 40 sweating people, most of them smoking *machorka*¹ (stalks of tobacco leaves) or beech leaves produced an atmosphere only to be met with in Russia. The journey lasted two days. Our reborn optimism made them more bearable and we spent a large part of the time having rosy dreams.

¹ (Μαχόρκα) - *Nicotiana rustica*, a very potent variety of tobacco that was smoked in Russia by the lower classes before normal tobacco became widely available after WWII.

Yekaterinburg (Sverdlovsk)

We arrived at the big railway station of Yekaterinburg late on the evening of the second day. We spent an hour waiting on the platform, while Am Ende went into the town to make enquiries. He found out that travelling further was prohibited and strictly controlled; and that in town in a prisoner of war camp, was a former private house we could stay for one week to look for work and accommodations. Typhus was said to be raging. Every day at least two of the inmates of the camp were carried off to hospital and in town the people were dying like flies.

The prospects were not tempting at all! The three of us therefore decided not to enter the town. We spent the night shivering in the cold in an unheated goods wagon. During the day we idled around the station in the hope to slip into a train unobserved. But this was in vain and in the evening we had to give in and follow the others. The house looked gloomy, empty rooms with bug infested plank beds. The food was as in Ishim. After one hour it was quite clear to us that to stay there was out of the question.

Am Ende had already been looking for work and the day after he became assistant to a departmental chief. After a week he got himself a still better position, this time right at the source (i.e. the Gub. Prod. Com.) i.e. the provincial food department, where he soon proved himself indispensable. A small flat near the station, one room and a kitchen was allotted to him. It was extremely modest but it was home. As a sideline, he began to repair typewriters. He soon achieved great dexterity in this work and because of the large number of damaged typewriters; he soon had a flourishing business such that he decided to give up his other job. This suited him better anyhow since he did not like working under a soviet boss.

From time to time I sauntered to the station, which with our permanent urge to escape, attracted us like a magnet. After a few days a hospital train caught my attention. It was composed of a number of express train carriages and many "teplushka" at the rear all linked up with corridors. "That might be a good opportunity for a job and chances for further escape." With these thoughts in mind I addressed an intelligent looking man who was just leaning out of a window and lo and behold he answered my "workers and soldiers Russian" in perfect German. They could do with some help, he said, and took me along to the "tovarishch" commander.

Comment [J16]: Not sure about this.

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When I returned to the camp, everything had been fixed up for the three of us, and only an hour later we were on the train. We were registered by the cashier, a former officer of the imperial army. Everybody received us kindly, including the "starshij"¹ (N.C.O.) who was in charge of the nursing staff and consequently of us. This lively little man with a beaming good natured face took us at once through to the next car, which served as a kitchen and dining room into a genuine Russian express carriage third class. Each compartment had two lower and two upper bunks. The upper ones could be tipped up. One of these compartments was to be ours. We received proper mattresses, warm blankets and clean white sheets. It was pleasantly heated and at the window there was a collapsible table. Altogether it was like a dream. The only missing thing was a sign outside "From Yekaterinburg to Petrograd, Dvinsk to Hamburg-Altona".

We made ourselves at home, tried to establish some contact with our Russian comrades and were soon called to dinner. The meal was excellent and we were given extra big helpings, as the hard times had obviously told on us. Then we were disinfected near the railway station and our clothes deloused. The first five to six days passed very comfortably. The empty train was cleaned and disinfected, in which we participated. Provisions were fetched in sledges from town, such as meat, fish, bread and butter. There was plenty of leisure. Now we enjoyed strolling about in the beautiful town which after Siberian impressions appeared to us monumental and highly civilised. Many Russians considered it one of the outstanding towns of the country, not just because of its many imposing stone buildings, but also because of its beautiful situation, among the hills and forests of the Urals.

The few days we spent waiting for our first trip happened to coincide with Christmas time. The many resident Germans used this occasion to reopen their club, which was closed at the outbreak of war. We attended the first meeting to which we were invited. Everyone was well dressed, for us an unusual sight. The representative of a German electrical concern presided. A soviet commissar was present and every speaker emphasized the completely unpolitical character of the club and its adherence to the Soviet regime. The foundation of a German school was under discussion. The soviet of Yekaterinburg had not only given its agreement beforehand, but had also put a building at the disposal of the club. The teachers were to be selected by the club, subject

¹ (старший) – Russian military 'elder' (NCO).

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to approval by the soviet. The town would pay two-thirds of the teacher's salaries and provide for one meal daily for each child. Russian was to be compulsory but all other subjects could be taught in German. Religious instruction was forbidden. Any influencing against the regime would lead to the closing of the school. On these conditions the founding of the school was decided. The next point discussed was the library. Here also the soviet was willing to help with the necessary rooms and the German books in its possession. In the end it was decided to arrange a Christmas party for all Germans in town, including us.

Thus in the evening of the 24th of December, the three of us appeared in the gaily decorated and illuminated hall. We tried to look as presentable as possible but felt rather uncomfortable in our shabby uniforms among all the well dressed citizens. Even their kind words to us in their speeches did not help much. But quite apart from this we found the evening far from enjoyable. The cheerfulness was forced and without warmth. Probably everyone was too much concerned with their own worries. But I was really taken aback by a performance of public charity. A poor woman with her small boys was lead up to the dais where she and the children received a small present. In front of everybody they had to express their thanks and obviously felt deeply humiliated and embarrassed.

This was Christmas 1919, far from home, the sixth since the outbreak of war. Every year since the peace of Brest-Litovsk in 1917, we P.O.W.s were convinced that our next Christmas would be at home. Again we had been disappointed but at least we were free men just as all the Russians around us. They had no more freedom of movement than we had.

The evening before our departure we visited a German lady who had offered to lend us some German books. She still lived undisturbed in her comfortable upper class flat. Of her many rooms she was forced to let only two to others. It appeared that the attitude of the local soviet towards the bourgeois population was less hostile than in Ishim.

The last few days on the train had been most pleasant, more so than any others during the years of our captivity. Now the real work was to begin. We travelled with the empty train to Bogdanovitch¹ and Ishim. There we took on 450 patients suffering

¹ (Богданович) – a small town approximately 100 kilometers east of Yekaterinburg.

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from typhus¹, many of them already near to death. The train became overcrowded. The bunks in the goods wagons went right through from end to end in two stories, and the patients had to be bedded so close together that they could hardly move. The poor souls were fully dressed, even in overcoats, untended and unbathed, full of dirt and vermin which they had carried with them for weeks and months. They were all soldiers, nearly all of them belonging to the remains of the Kolchak army. Carrying them in had been hard work and had taken hours. The stoves had been lit beforehand and soon the heat in the cars was terrific. It was always in such cases that those in the upper bunks could hardly breathe in the heat, whereas those on the lower bunks shivered in the icy draught which entered through the ill-fitting doors.

The return journey to Yekaterinburg proved to be a nightmare. During the day the patients were given two meals and tea twice. The kitchen was right behind the engine and the distance to the last wagon was over 100 yards, which we had to cover with heavy pails of food and jugs of tea and drinking water. Each of us had to take care of 60–80 seriously ill people. We had to dish out their food and help those that could hardly move. Then there were the dishes to wash. Those who were too weak to relieve themselves had to be helped onto the bucket and back to their berth. The bucket had to be emptied, the fire stoked, drinking water handed out. There was not an idle moment.

It is hardly necessary to mention that we came all the time into direct contact with the patients. It was impossible to keep ourselves clean. We scrubbed ourselves frequently with carbolic acid² which was so strong that it burnt our skin. In this way the day passed, interrupted only by brief meals which began with the singing of *The Internationale*³. At night we had four hours of duty, mainly stoking the fires, distributing drinking water and helping patients to relieve themselves.

Altogether the conditions were dreadful. After several doctors had died of this illness there was none left to take charge. None of the three sisters dared go near any of the patients. They only came when required to identify a corpse. People started dying already

¹ During the Russian Civil War, between 1918 and 1922, there were 20-30 million cases of Typhus in Russia, resulting in approximately 3 million fatalities.

² Also known as 'Phenol', it was later used by the Nazis in the form of direct injections as a part of their euthanasia program.

³ A famous socialist and communist anthem which became the de facto national anthem of the Soviet Union from 1922 to 1944.

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after the first hours of travelling, 48 people in the three days to Yekaterinburg. At all the stations where we stopped, we had to unload the dead. We carried them on stretchers to the mortuary, a solid shed which was to be found near to almost any station. As it was impossible to bury anybody during the winter in the deeply frozen ground, the corpses had to be stored until springtime. For these poor people there could of course be no question of a coffin. We undressed them completely in the snow in front of the building. There they lay, the emaciated, unclean bodies, bitten all over by the poisonous lice, mottled and spotted. Two of us had to carry them inside, gripping their hands and feet. If the shed was already too full with these stiffly frozen corpses to throw them on top of the pile, we had to climb on top of it. To do so required indescribable moral effort. This remains one of my most terrible war memories.

Later when I was stricken with the disease myself, these memories were tormenting me in my delirium. Once we met with an act of unbelievable brutality. A well dressed Russian couple looked on at our disgusting work. As the dead body was lying there naked, the man was about to turn and go but the woman looked on with obvious pleasure and laughed aloud when we lifted it. We complained to the "starshij" that we had to do this work so often but he proved that the Russians had to do it just as often. With that we had to be satisfied.

Once I saw a grey patch the size of a hand on the brown overcoat of a patient. When I looked closer, I saw that it continually changed its outline and that it actually consisted of lice in such numbers that they were even crawling over the top of each other. This man I had to unload at Yekaterinburg. He put his arms around my neck and I carried him to the ambulance like many others. This also created an almost unbearable nervous strain. A large number of the staff caught the disease during every trip and for those there was a special carriage. This meant that there were many new faces on every trip. When we accepted this job we were fully aware of the danger of infection, but this did not hold us back since people were also infected in large numbers in the camps, as well as in factories, offices and homes. What we had not foreseen was the exhausting work for the pitiable patients and the gruesome handling of the dead with its depressing effect.

Among us male nurses there was only one young and pretty female who shared all the hard work with us except for the carrying. When she fell ill she was put into a separate part of the staff carriage. There she received the visits of her boyfriend and even then she

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still enjoyed his caresses. I saw it once myself. No wonder that he too became a victim. She recovered, while he died.

On the next trip, this time to Perm¹ on the western side of the Urals, things were much the same. One of the new staff who shared our carriage was a bit of a nuisance in so far as his fur jacket spread a horrible smell, as these furs sometimes do.

The higher ranks did not change much because they did not come into direct contact with the patients. The first to mention was the commander. He had no knowledge of medicine, railway techniques or administration. It was even said that he could hardly write, but of course he was a member of the party and received the highest salary. He lost no opportunity to make party speeches and favoured all other party members. The work was done by the cashier and the German quartermaster who shared the whole administration in a friendly manner. As they were no communists, their official rank was a subordinate one and they depended entirely on the goodwill of the commander, whom they despised. Once when I entered the room of the cashier I saw that they were hastily hiding something, but a few moments later they smilingly produced a bottle and a beaker from under the bench and offered me a drink. I sniffed it and declined it with thanks. It was denatured alcohol for burning; slightly pink in colour. Well meant as their offer was, my hosts were neither astonished nor offended. Now each of them drank half of it themselves, pulling terrible faces and blocking their noses. Then they quickly swallowed a huge piece of bread each to get rid of the nauseating taste.

I remember one really cheerful episode on this trip to Perm. One night when the train was standing for hours on a siding, I was on train guard duty. I was tramping around the train in the snow armed with an ancient rifle and naturally without ammunition. From time to time I warmed myself by the fire in the kitchen which I had to keep going. Once when I was just doing that, a Russian comrade turned up and told me a long story. Only when he had nearly finished its meaning dawned on me. At the last issue of provisions in Yekaterinburg he had pinched a large frozen pike. Now was the night he wanted to cook it. This he could only do with my permission, for which he offered me a share in the meal. I learnt a lot from his art of cooking. He put plenty of onions, pepper, salt and water into a saucepan on the fire where he let it boil for a long time. In the meantime, he prepared the fish which

¹ (Пермь) – situated on the banks of the Kama River

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was cooked in this aromatic broth. The result was delicious. It was however quite impossible to finish it off. He was going to pass the remainder on to our boss, the "starshij". Feeling thoroughly warmed up, I completed my night watch.

For the second trip the administration in Yekaterinburg had supplied a stock of clothing for our staff. The distribution was entrusted to a commission. We learnt to our astonishment that the three of us were to be the first to be considered. We received fur jackets, knee-high felt boots (*valenki*¹) and underwear. After more than three years in Russia this was the first time that I was properly clothed for its severe winters.

When we were on our third journey, this time in the direction of Omsk, I fell ill. Typhus was of course the first thought and I was at once put into the carriage for the sick staff. Fortunately it was quite harmless, just a bad cold with a temperature. Most probably I had caught it when coming out of the overheated dining car, where I stood for a while with an unbuttoned coat at an open carriage door, to enjoy some cold fresh air (-20°C) and the snow covered slopes of the Urals. The old matron, who, as I mentioned before did not dare enter the *teplushka*, now let her whole medical knowledge loose on me. Every few hours she came with another powder, and having swallowed far too many of them I brought the whole lot up again. Thereafter all other medicines went out the window.

When we arrived back in Yekaterinburg I had sufficiently recovered to help with the unloading, though it exhausted me more than usual. The sojourn in Yekaterinburg, mostly 4–5 days, was always very pleasant. There was little work, plenty of rest, cleanliness and walking around the town. Am Ende was visited every time. He was now fully occupied with the repair of typewriters. During the fourth trip, Sahn and Drange came down with typhus and were unloaded in Yekaterinburg. I missed them very much and felt rather lonely. I visited them on every return in hospital, where they both recovered fairly quickly. When on a later trip I felt extremely miserable, I thought at first that it was due to the particularly hard work of the previous days. We had had more deaths than usual and I had fallen several times over corpses lying in the passageway, but soon I felt feverish and reported myself sick.

I had to lie on an upper bunk; the lower ones were all occupied. When we arrived in Yekaterinburg after three days, I was already

¹ (валенки) – Traditional Russian winter footwear, translating literally to "made by felting".

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too weak to climb down, or to dress myself without help. Just at the moment when the sledges were ready to take us to the hospital, Sahn and Drange appeared. Beaming, they told me they were on four weeks leave, which they would spend as guests on the train. They quickly packed my few things together, helped me onto a sledge and again it was goodbye. This time it was for good. It was the end of a comradeship that had tied us intimately together through all our common troubles since we had left Krasnoyarsk, which now seemed very, very long ago.

A few minutes of swift driving and we stopped in front of the monumental Alapayevski hospital. There followed the usual washing with chattering teeth and soon I was in the diagnostic ward. A young German male nurse enthusiastically got hold of me and took me without asking anybody to his section. It was a short lived pleasure. Only a few hours later I was moved to an upper floor into the typhus ward. There a Russian sister nursed me devotedly. For instance she cleaned my mouth twice daily with cotton wool soaked in hydrogen peroxide. As my temperature was rising steadily I took less and less food. Being constipated I got enemas and because of my weakness I sometimes soiled my bed, which was an agonizing situation. But the worst was to come when my heart started to beat irregularly. During the times of the highest temperatures, injections of camphor¹ brought great relief. The worst, which may have lasted about a week, saw me semiconscious and only vaguely aware of what was happening around me. So I shall never know whether the man Rot who I had met in Ishim was really carried into the ward, or whether it was delusion. Once I even had the feeling that there was a heated argument between the doctor and sister on the one hand and an officer of the *Cheka* on the other. This man wanted to arrest Rot but the doctor would not allow it and the officer had to be satisfied to get a bed besides Rot, whom he maintained he was not allowed to lose sight of.

One night I awoke to full consciousness and the first and last thing I saw was a head quite close to mine with a black patch over one eye. It was the doctor who was just going to give me a camphor injection. At that moment I felt much better, my heart was beating quite regularly and I said in German, "I don't need it any more." He answered also in German, "Yes, you do." Pointing at the board over my head, where the injection was indicated. But I insisted,

Comment [J17]: Later moved, possibly to the town now named Alapayevsk which is in Sverdlovsk Oblast near Yekaterinburg.

¹ Used to provide a cooling sensation, it is used as an active ingredient along with menthol in vapor-steam products and cough suppressants.

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and feeling my pulse he said, "You are right it is no longer necessary." He wished me a good night and left. The crisis had passed and I was out of danger.

At the beginning of my illness I had felt a strong will to stay alive and return home. As I became weaker day by day, this will slowly faded and sometimes even the idea came to me how easy it would be to die and be finished with everything. This had changed now from one moment to the other.

Afresh I felt the strong urge to recover as quickly as possible and be on my way again. This helped me with getting back some strength so that after only a few days I was able, supported by two nurses, to climb the stairs to an upper ward. There I was supposed to recuperate for some weeks. Most of the time I spent dreaming asleep as well as awake. My dreams always revolved around the things I was longing for, my return home, marriage, family life etc. The awakening was mostly rather ugly. There I was again in a big ward amidst thirty to forty suffering and moaning people.

Because of the strong cold of the Russian winter, the windows were glued shut with strips of paper and the doors always had to be kept closed. Imagine the air. It was absolutely poisonous from the exhalations of these poor people whom it was difficult to keep clean. Quite close to me lay a shrunken and shrivelled old man who only a few weeks before had been a strapping young soldier. That was what the disease had done to him. Was I looking like that myself?

Once, gift parcels were distributed, a pleasant surprise. The reason for this, I think, was the conquest of Irkutsk by the Red Army. I also got one; a bag full of very welcome things such as a good helping of ground coffee, perfumed soap the scent of which seemed at that time delightful to me, also tobacco, matches and cigarette papers. The latter things I swapped for more coffee. Every morning somebody made the rounds with boiling hot water or tea. Into my beaker, a preserving tin, the water was poured over my coffee and sugar which I had already put into it. The coffee was so strong that it completely covered the tea if this had been put in instead. Its effect was so stimulating and I enjoyed it so much that I looked forward to it from day to day.

I was now fit enough to leave the ward to wash myself and for other purposes. Occasionally I sketched out the view out of the window, a monumental baroque church with its cupola. When the doctor came to see me she always showed her satisfaction with my progress. Only sleeplessness was still bothering me and the

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bromide¹ which I received did not help. A senior male nurse, whose name was Wilhelm, was in charge of the ward. He was a quiet serious man who did his work with special care. He had often passed my bed but one day he stopped to ask me in a rather Austrian dialect whether he could lend me some German books. I was only too pleased. From then on I was never without something to read. From now on we talked a little every day. I found this animating, having hardly spoken a German word since I entered the hospital. The young German nurse who had taken possession of me at the very beginning visited me also. He was just about to marry a very young Russian "santarka", and both intended to carry on with their work at the hospital.

Comment [J18]: Could be her name. Also a town in the Ukraine.

When the doctor told me that I would be released in a few days as fully recovered, she added that I had a claim for a few weeks holiday. She wished to know where I wanted to spend it. As I had heard that my hospital train had been transferred to other parts, which explained the complete absence of Sahn and Drange, I had not the slightest idea where to go. For the doctor this was almost impossible to understand. Was their neither a relation or a friend or any place where I could go? In the end I asked her if I could not get work in the hospital pharmacy. I had quite a good knowledge of chemistry from my school days. She promised to try her best.

When a few days later I was released I found myself on the roll of the pharmacy staff. I still felt rather weak which was little wonder after 6 weeks of serious illness, and perhaps also partly due to the poisonous air I had breathed for such a long time. So I dragged myself over the snow covered square to the house which contained the general bedrooms of the nurses. Side by side without gaps stood the iron beds with their mattresses. I threw myself on the nearest empty one and fell asleep at once. After a few hours of leaden sleep, somebody nudged me. A comrade claimed the place as his and so I crawled onto the next bed and slept on. This was repeated every few hours until the next morning and even during the next few days while I slept for about 16 hours out of 24, until at last I got a bed of my own.

On the third day I commenced work at the pharmacy, which was a huge bright place on the ground floor of the hospital. I presented myself to the chief pharmacist, a kindly looking young man. He was Polish and spoke German well. As I had already told the doctor, I also pointed out to him my limited knowledge but he

¹ A sedative.

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asked me to try all the same. In case I still felt weak I should take my time. That day I only looked around and got acquainted with the others. There were three or four young male pharmacists and one elderly female who was the assistant chief. The work proceeded quietly, without rush in a pleasant atmosphere. I really started the next day. Since the boss was often absent I could make myself useful by reading the prescriptions written out in clear Latin letters, which the others could spell only with difficulty. My work was of the simplest type, such as the preparation of caffeine powders and similar things. After a few days however I already had to prepare prescriptions which occasionally contained quite strong poisons.

Besides this I had to concoct all kinds of ointments, extracts from plants and to prepare and sterilise solutions of salt and camphor for injections. As the working hours were not taken too strictly, it could happen that when the main work of the day was finished I found myself alone to deal with further incoming work. A truly ridiculous situation but it never worried me. As payment I got full board and a small salary and though the meals were not bad, I bought myself such treasures as milk, cottage cheese and white bread at the open market. In order to get more clothes I joined the "Soyuz"¹ – the official union of nurses. Through it I got a solid "rubashka"² (the high necked shirt which the Russians used to wear outside their trousers), a pair of trousers, gaiters and a leather belt. These things had until lately been worn by a man who had died of typhus. I brought a blue shirt home which I meant to keep for the rest of my life, but in the course of various migrations it got lost.

In the meantime Wilhelm had come down with undulant fever, lying in the ward for the sick staff. At his bedside I often met a woman, who was not very young, who nursed him with loving care. He looked very pale and the periodic attacks were wearing him out. After about three weeks when he had recovered, he invited me to his home. One day when the couple came to fetch his rations which he received as an external, they took me along home. We had to walk quite a way through the town until we entered one of the single houses where Wilhelm lived with this woman, the wife of a Kolchak officer now in Siberia. The house was hers and consisted of two rooms and a big kitchen. One of these rooms she had let to a nurse, who shared it with her boyfriend. Nevertheless it was a

¹ (Союз) – Union, including nonprofit organizations.

² (Рубашка) – Jacket, generally made of cloth and worn as an outer layer.

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real home, in which she did everything to spoil him, going even so far as to sell her jewellery.

Now I began to see them more frequently and sometimes I stayed for tea. Twice he took me to the theatre where he knew an usherette and so saved the entrance money for both of us. I had a peculiar feeling when I entered the huge elegant theatre hall for the first time after so many years. We heard two Russian operas, the text of which I did not understand, but I enjoyed the music. Once we went with his wife to the pictures. There was a large crowd and it gave me a ghastly feeling to see them laughing unconcernedly about a silly film while lice spread from one to the other and spread death. But it seemed out of the question to close down the places of amusement. They were necessary to keep the people in good spirits. The scarcer the bread, the more important the circuses, and also for political propaganda. Once we went to try one of the public restaurants, established in one of the former private elegant ones. In the entrance hall we joined a long queue to get tickets. Then we climbed the stairs to the first floor with its dining rooms. We had to wait for a long time until one of the nicely set tables, covered with white cloth became vacant. A waitress served us. The tickets had cost very little money and the meals were accordingly poor. A dish of watery soup, a miniature hamburger with a few drops of gravy and one little slice of white bread. That was all and one went as hungry as one came.

Occasionally I met the German nurse whom I had seen with his young wife. They had been lodged in a dormitory for married couples, where their beds were simply separated by screens. I asked him how he liked married life. "Ah," he answered, "that is already finished. I am not married any more." Very astonished I asked him how he could possibly have been divorced so quickly. "Ah, that was not necessary at all. It was only a trial marriage. As soon as we started to quarrel we decided to separate again." He was glad to be through with it.

In the meantime, my work at the pharmacy had continued regularly and my knowledge much improved. As I had fewer distractions than the others, I was the most reliable worker and more often left on my own. But my salary did not go up. So to my great surprise my chief asked me one day whether I would not try an examination for an assistant pharmacist to improve my position. I accepted with pleasure and the Pole arranged for the exam to take place three weeks hence. I felt sure that my knowledge was sufficient; the only drawback was my rather scant knowledge of Russian.

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Suddenly however, everything that had been of interest to me in Yekaterinburg lost all importance because of a rumour which went around the town. It was said that an epidemic of cholera had broken out and that very shortly the boundaries of the province would be closed to all traffic. Thoughts of escape had never left me, but I had decided to wait until the end of winter and I would have regained my full strength. Now I was stirred into immediate action.



A general view of the central part of Yekaterinburg, c. 1910

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A general view of the southern part of Yekaterinburg, c. 1910

The Flight From Yekaterinburg

Just at that time I met in the street a young lieutenant, Schiffman, who had been tricked with me into the volunteer regiment of Baron Gerard at Novo Archangelsk. Being out of a job, he walked aimlessly through the streets and was glad to meet me. I told him about the circumstances and suggested a joint escape to which he enthusiastically agreed.

In order not to miss the last train we had to prepare ourselves without delay. It was most important to get a large quantity of *suchari*¹. This was a rusk which was prepared from all kinds of bread. It combined the advantages of great nutritive value and little weight. With the help of the hospital bakers I had the necessary amount of rusks within a few days. We sold any superfluous clothing on the market and brought with the money ground coffee, sugar and a teapot.

We met every day to walk to the station. Often we visited Am Ende who lived quite close to it. His family of course made it impossible for him to leave. Once we walked a bit further into the open country. It was toward the end of March and spring was in the air, a glorious day. The snow had melted off the sunny slopes. We went into a beautiful forest and soon found a sunny sheltered spot to lie down. There Schiffman told me of his adventures.

The day Sahn, Drange and I bolted from Novo Archangelsk, the whole stock of clothing had been distributed, with the Germans also getting their share. The retreat started the same afternoon with a forced march to Omsk, where chaos was already reigning. This enabled most of the P.O.W.s to get away from the regiment, but only a few succeeded to cross the Irtysh on the big railway bridge. Schiffman was one of them and as he had quite a bit of money he, together with some others, was able to hire a sledge. They succeeded to get behind the Red lines in the Urals after driving for many days along devious routes to avoid the highways. There however the same happened to him. His money was without value and he had to tramp.

He was an agriculturalist with a university degree. As such he had easily found employment in a leading position on a model farm which the Yekaterinburg soviet had recently founded, not far from the town. To make it a real success however, the work was all too

¹ (Сухари) – Translates as 'blocks', a type of wheat biscuit.

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often hindered by the frequent political meetings (*sobranie*¹) which were often arranged when the work was most urgent. This was most irritating to Schiffman because it was everybody's fundamental political right, which preceded everything else. After a while he was so fed up that he asked to be relieved from his job. The reason he gave was insufficiency of the Russian language. This was granted and a few days later we met.

The pleasant walk in the fresh air and the beautiful landscape strongly stimulated our urge to return home. It was half Wanderlust and half homesickness. Back in town I went straight away to Wilhelm and suggested that he should join us. He had got too domesticated by his semi bourgeois life with his Russian woman to throw himself into adventures. When I left him we expected this to be our last farewell.

The next morning it was made known that in a few days time the Alapayevski with its entire staff and equipment was to move into one of the smaller towns in the province of Tobolsk. I had barely heard this when I was on my way to Schiffman and we decided to try our luck that very day. I went to the dormitory to pack my few belongings into a sack and with it on my back went to Am Ende where we had decided to meet. A few minutes later Schiffman arrived also. Am Ende was unhappy that he was forced to stay. We had a meal with them, then leaving our things behind we went to the station to reconnoitre.

A train for Perm was standing there without an engine as yet, composed of endless rows of *teplushka*. Just what we wanted! A huge number of ragged people were waiting alongside the train, amongst them a large group of Hungarians, "*plenniks*" of course. At once we went up to them. There were twenty on their way from Siberia to Kungur² to work in a mine. The larger part of the crowd were European Russians who had been scattered all over Siberia by the upheavals of war and revolution. Now the Soviet government endeavoured to bring them home with their families and the remainder of their possessions. This train was one of those specifically to serve that purpose. We rushed to Am Ende for our sacks and took heartfelt leave of him. A few minutes later we mingled with the waiting crowd to disappear into a *teplushka* in the darkness under one of the bunks behind heaps of luggage.

¹ (Собрание) – meeting or assembly.

² (Кунгур) – located in the Urals approximately 230 kilometers West of Yekaterinburg, Kungur is famous for a nearby giant ice cave formation.

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But we had not remained quite unobserved. After a few minutes a man was crawling towards us, a man with a big beard wearing a Russian army coat. He asked us in an unmistakably Austrian accent if we would allow him to join us. His name was Weiss, a forester from Vienna. We were not very pleased but could not very well refuse him. So now there were three of us.

Hours passed while we were crouching in our dark hole, afraid that a last minute check might take place. With a sigh of relief we felt the train move at last, in the darkness of the night. There had been no inspection. The next afternoon we reached Kungur, the first big station still in the province of Yekaterinburg. Here human weakness forced us out of our hiding place to go to the lavatory and to fetch boiling water for coffee.

With the teapot in my hand I was suddenly arrested by a soldier of the militia. I had to follow him into the guard's room while the sack was in the train. There were already several before me, all Russians and I realised with horror that everybody without a valid passport was mercilessly arrested. When my turn came I produced my legitimate one from the hospital and complained indignantly about this unjustified procedure. Luck was with me. My document authorized me to move freely in the province of Yekaterinburg. Seeing it the officer released me, caring little that the train to which I returned would leave the province almost directly. Thus I got away with a fright – it was not to be the last one.

Travelling on we mixed a bit with the returning fugitives. When we prepared our coffee it made everybody's mouth water. By offering occasionally a cup to one then to the other we made ourselves popular and now felt quite comfortable. When the frequent checks of our train took place we had to disappear smartly into our dark corner. Though lying on the floor under the bunk behind the sacks, boxes and suitcases, it happened quite a few times that we were discovered. Then we feigned complete ignorance and simply said, "*plenniks*" and "*domoi*"¹ and believe it or not, it worked. The soldiers who took every Russian without satisfactory papers off the train left us in peace. In this way after four or five days we reached Perm, the final destination of this train.

For several hours we lingered at the station and had coffee or something to eat on the platform. We had our eyes on a goods train and when it began to move we jumped on. We clambered into one of the open goods wagons, which was piled up high with

¹ Home.

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sledges. A moment later we had vanished from the scene, each of us in one of them. The train moved very slowly, at best only 20 kilometres per hour, stopping at every siding where we jumped down to get warm. The staff worked only 8 hours, whereupon the train stopped for 8 hours at the next shunting place or station. Sometimes we used the time to beg for food in a nearby village.

After several days on this train a conscientious officer threw us out, but very soon after that we found another opportunity. It happened that the staff allowed us to sit with them in their heated wagon. Other times we froze stiff in open goods wagons and were kicked out at every station. This went on for about ten days until we found once more a place in a refugee train. With us travelled a Russian soldier who looked extremely wretched and shabby. He had just received his "payok"¹ (daily ration) at the last station and showed it sadly to us. It consisted roughly of four ounces of bad brown bread, 3 to 4 little cubes of sugar and a small salted herring. "No tea," he said, "there is no tea any more." He poured hot water into a cup, put a piece of sugar into his mouth and sipped the tasteless drink over it, in the way Russian peasants are used to drinking their tea. We runaways were better off with all the coffee and sugar we still had. We gave the poor devil some of ours which made him come out of his shell a bit and he told us his story.

In 1915 his division had been sent to the Franco-German front, in order to emphasise the friendly relations between the Allies. When, as a consequence of the second revolution in October 1917 the armistice between Germany and Russia was declared, this division refused to fight on. As punishment they were interred in northern France. When England decided to assist General Denikin in his fight against the Soviets from the Black Sea, they formed an expeditionary corps into which they also recruited among the Russian internees in northern France, not without exerting slight pressure. Our companion who was thoroughly fed up with camp life followed this call and went for a period of training to England. From there the corps was sent by boat to Novorossiysk². They arrived just at the time when Denikin's army, completely defeated, had been driven back to the shores of the Black Sea, and stepped straight away into captivity with the remnants of the White Army. Our companion, who was naturally one of the captives, was sent with the whole lot across the Caucasus to Baku³ on the Caspian Sea

¹ (паёк) – ration.

² (Новоросси́йск) – the main Russian port on the Black Sea.

³ The capital city of Azerbaijan

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and from there on by boat. He spent several months in camps until at last he was released on home leave to his native province of Vologda¹. The voyage via Orenburg and Yekaterinburg had taken several weeks. Through all these he had to live entirely on deplorably poor rations. For luggage he had his *chainik* and his food bag.

Now he was almost home but he knew only too well that it would be a short time before he would be called up into the Red Army. He told us his story without bitterness, rather with a kind of religious resignation. It was moving to see the simplicity with which he spoke about his sufferings and the increasing joy as he at last approached his home. His personality reminded me very much of Karataiev in "War and Peace".

Schiffman and I felt mostly confident since everything had gone quite smoothly after my interlude at Kungur, even though it looked at times that the guardians of the law were becoming dangerous for us. But what would have been unthinkable in Germany was an everyday occurrence here. One threw us out of trains and stations, snarled at us here and there and then took no more notice of us. The two of us had already become thick skinned, but poor Weiss, looking quite martial with his big beard, paled every time a Russian in uniform was coming along. He was constantly restless, a state that was a great disadvantage to an enterprise like ours and sometimes got on our nerves.

In spite of the many obstacles, we arrived one day at the big station of Vologda which was the terminal of this train. We had passed through Vyatka² and Buy³, two of the places which I still remembered from my journey to Siberia in March 1917. The first thing after our arrival was to make ourselves a bit presentable, which meant cleaning ourselves at the lavatory. Then we found a sheltered sunny spot on the lively platform to rest and drink a good cup of coffee.

We had not been lying there long when the express from Petrograd, drawn by an enormous engine tore into the station. Its appearance was indescribable. Not only the interior of the carriages was crammed with human bodies beyond belief, but we also saw them

¹ (Вологда) – A district 400km north-east of Moscow (~1200km west of Yekaterinburg).

² Now known as Kirov (Киров), situated on the Vyatka River on the western side of the Urals; it is a major hub on the Trans-Siberian railway.

³ (Буй) – A small town between Kirov and St Petersburg, it was home to another large prisoner of war camp during WWI.

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everywhere outside. They were lying on the roofs, clinging to the couplings and hanging out of the open windows. Even the engine was full of passengers. The outside passengers climbed down as soon as the train stopped, but from the inside only a few emerged, while some others tried to squeeze themselves in through windows and doors. This caused a lot of argument and noise and hardly anybody succeeded. Even the soldiers of the militia had trouble to get in for checking of the papers. In the meantime the engine had been uncoupled and driven to the coal depot. Black as moors some stowaways came out of the tender, which had to be refilled.

This done, they climbed up again and the stokers looked laughingly on as they dug themselves into the coal. The moment the train was about to start, the outside passengers tried to regain their places. This was the signal for the outbreak of a ferocious battle between them and the militia, who pulled them by the arms and legs and clothes away from their precarious hold. But there were too few of them to succeed. The one who had just been brought down jumped up again while the soldier struggled with the next one. Thus the train moved out just as cluttered up with people as it had arrived and still the infuriated soldiers went on trying. Some even held on so firmly that the soldiers had to run beside them faster and faster and had at last to give up at the end of the station. This was one of those spectacles where one does not know whether to laugh or cry. We looked after the train with a feeling of envy. This was the speed with which we would have liked to travel home.

Instead we looked all day in vain for any kind of train for ourselves, and when it got dark and cold we were forced to find shelter to sleep. This did not take long. On a siding there were some empty *teplushka* into one of which we moved. After two of us had pinched some firewood, the sliding doors were closed and soon the sparks blew out of the little chimney, while it became comfortably warm inside. Schiffman and I felt quite happy; only poor Weiss waited tensely for any steps or noise outside. Only once during the night there was a knock at the door and a guard asked, "Who is in there?" We answered "P.O.W.", and that was that. Four nights passed like that at the station of Vologda; the days were not so good. All our attempts with military, goods or *plennik* trains were in vain. The control was always severe and even the few times when we managed to get in we were thrown out at the last moment. We did not dare an attempt with the Petersburg Express which came through every day.

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Slowly we began to feel nervous and at last took the risk to ask for travelling documents. Schiffman went off to town taking with him the few things which we could still spare to sell on the market. From there he went straight to the commissar of plenbiesh (office for P.O.W. and fugitives) to try his luck. When he was asked what were the papers he had with which he arrived at Vologda, he had to admit, with none. "Get the hell out of here or I will have you arrested." Schiffman was shouted at. With this answer, and some money, sugar and butter he returned. Now we really began to lose courage. Already on the third day a guard had approached us and assuming that we did not understand any Russian looked sternly at us, holding up three fingers. We reacted with an understanding grin. The same thing repeated itself with four and five fingers. Nothing else was done. They kept their eye on us and left us alone. The fifth day however was to bring success.

In the afternoon there arrived a military transport for the Murmansk front of the Russo-Finnish War¹. Crowds of soldiers got out and as happened before, we talked to some who understood German because they had been P.O.W.'s in Germany. We told them about our plight and they invited us to travel with them. Climbing into one of the wagons we had the misfortune to be seen by the commander of the train who was about to throw us out. The *tovarishchi* entreated him so passionately that he weakened and gave in on the condition that in case of a control our presence must be reported. That reduced our chances to almost nil. But this time heaven itself took pity on us. Shortly before our departure, it was already dark, a terrific cloudburst came down. This was too much for the officials and the train drew out of the station unchecked. We sighed with relief. The Russians proved themselves very friendly. Weiss and I did not feel too well on the third day and at night it became worse. When once I had to leave the bunk, I lacked the strength to climb up again. This aroused suspicion. The next day when neither Weiss nor I rose at all, I heard the Russians discussing what to do with us.

Comment [J19]: Unknown.

¹ Also known as the North Russia Campaign or the 'Allied intervention in North Russia', this conflict saw the involvement of foreign troops in the Russian Civil War on the side of the White movement. The result (like that of the Russian Civil War) was a resounding defeat at the hands of the Bolsheviks.

Homecoming



The Mary Magdalene Church in Perm, c. 1910



The Ural Railway Administration HQ in Perm, c. 1910

Homecoming

Tikhvin

In the afternoon, at a larger station, the *starshij* got out to ring a hospital. Only a few minutes later eight medical orderlies arrived with two stretchers. Schiffman gave them our belongings, we said goodbye, and were carried to a nearby log-house. Both of us could no longer stand on our feet and Weiss was almost unconscious. Nobody tired us with any questions about our identity. I answered a few for both of us. Weiss was delirious and he got very restless, crying out accusations against Schiffman, who he maintained had stolen a lot of his money. I myself felt rather foggy and am not sure whether Schiffman really came once more to see us.

Two days must have passed before we were carried to a hospital at the other end of the township. On reception we were washed and then taken to different wards. I went into that for undulant fever¹, Weiss into the typhus ward. My temperature had gone down considerably and my head was clear again but I soon had another attack and during the days of high fever I heard nothing about him. A young man, almost a boy from a good Copenhagen family was lying next to me. Thirst for adventure had made him join the English army at Archangelsk and, slightly wounded, he was taken prisoner during its retreat. In his optimism he believed he would be back within a few days.

After my second attack I felt much better and was allowed to get up part of the day. Again I occupied myself sketching the view from the window, this time it was the view of a monumental monastery. Besides I read French books which my very friendly doctor got for me from the library. She spoke French and I learnt from her that I was at Tikhvin², a small town in the province of Cherepovets, only 170 km east of St Petersburg. The hospital was a branch hospital of the Finnish front.

Other doctors also came for a chat and to look at my sketches. They told me that Weiss was in a bad way but did not allow me to see him. However, 7 or 8 days later two doctors asked me to. I feared the worst. They took me to a big ward where I recognised him among all the other patients only when I stood directly by his bed. His face was withered and shrunk like that of an old man. It

¹ Also known as Brucellosis or 'Malta fever', undulant fever is a highly contagious disease that is usually caused by ingesting milk or meat from infected animals.

² (Тихвин) – A town on the banks of the Tikhvinka River, 200km East of St Petersburg, it is especially famous for the Orthodox Christian icon "Theotokos of Tikhvin" which was said to be painted by St. Luke the Evangelist.

Homecoming

was twitching faintly and his pale watery eyes were turned up so far that the irises were hardly visible. A little more than one week of high fever had brought this tall powerful man near to his death. I leant over him and called him by his name. He moved a little, tried to look and on his face there seemed to appear the ghost of a smile. The doctors requested me to identify him and took me back to my ward. Two hours later Weiss died. I was given his wallet, which contained a little Kolchak money and few small snapshots of himself.

One day when I had my third attack with a temperature of 40°C, I was taken into the ice-cold theatre, fastened to a table and one of my arms tied up. A doctor and two nurses erected beside me a type of scaffold from which a long tube dangled. The upper end was fixed to a funnel and the lower to a thin sharply pointed steel tube, which the doctor now tried to push into the protruding vein. Only in vain. All that happened was I got several holes through my skin while the vein slipped aside. In the end he had to give up and I was carried back. At her next visit I asked the doctor why they had wanted to draw blood from me. She burst out laughing and told me that it had been an attempt to inject salvarsan¹ to speed up my recovery. I was glad that the injection had failed and told her that under no circumstances would I allow a repetition. As a matter of fact no further attempt was made. I distrusted the salvarsan because I knew that Russia could not have got fresh supplies for years. I feared that salvarsan several years old could be poisonous and even now I am convinced that a successful injection would have been fatal.

I recovered completely after my third attack. The day of my discharge drew near and after the necessary number of days had passed without a relapse, I was told to be fit to leave. After a final bath I left the ward with its pleasant atmosphere. Downstairs in a cold room my disinfected clothes were waiting for me and full of disgust I put them on, a creased shabby bundle, smelling of sweat and oxide of sulphur. All of it had been worn day and night since I had left Yekaterinburg. Somebody showed me the way to the *vojna*² commissar in whose hands rested the whole administration of this township behind the Finnish front. There I was told that one still had to decide what to do with me.

¹ Also known as arsphenamine, it was used amongst other things as an anti-syphilitic drug. Studies have shown it was toxic, painful and largely ineffective.

² (Война) – War.

Homecoming

In the meantime I got a bunk in a nearby wooden barrack. I felt rather weak. The walk through the unpaved sandy streets had tired me. I was so emaciated that it hurt me to lie on the boards, to which I had been completely accustomed before. For food I got watery soup with a few small fish cooked in it and some doughy brown bread. In the afternoon an orderly called me to the commander's office. I waited with some other convalescents for a final examination. When my turn came I had to undress fully and show myself to a large assembly of doctors, male and female, partly known to me. One of the women doctors examined me carefully and dictated the result. According to it my heart had suffered. In the end a discussion followed as to what to do with me. I was an exceptional case. After a long argument a doctor who knew me asked me in German what I wanted. I answered, "I want to go home. Please give me a travelling permit with which I can travel via St Petersburg to Germany." In the ensuing discussion the doctor supported me energetically. Some declared that they had no authority to send me to St Petersburg, but only eastwards to the provincial capital of Cherepovets¹. The woman doctor who had examined me pointed out that the condition of my heart would not allow the journey to Germany and it would be necessary to give me first a month recreational leave. As in Yekaterinburg, somebody asked me whether I had any relation or friend to go to in Russia. The final result was given to me in German: I was to be sent to Cherepovets, with the recommendation to give me a four week holiday in Chelyabinsk² in western Siberia where I could get better nourishment than in starving European Russia. My papers would be prepared on the following morning, and after that an escort would accompany me on my voyage.

I dressed and returned to my bunk deeply disappointed and depressed, dead tired and shivering with the cold. In the meantime most of my remaining provisions had disappeared from my bag. In spite of my exhaustion I could not sleep. On top of it all the bugs began to attack me as it grew dark. Tossing restlessly I remembered the calculations at the beginning of our escape, which made the day of our homecoming so near and all the obstacles which made these calculations afterwards appear like a child's dream. I remembered the illnesses and privations, the separation

¹ (Череповец) – Located in the cross-roads of the major Volga-Baltic waterway, West-East railroads and between Moscow and St Petersburg, Cherepovets is a large industrial centre in Russia.

² (Челя́бинск) – Situated East of the Urals and South of Yekaterinburg, it was one of the centers from which the Trans-Siberian railway was constructed.

Homecoming

from Sahn and Drange and the death of Weiss. Now I was lying here, tortured by painful thoughts quite alone, weak, cold, hungry and tormented by bugs. They would send me 2000 km back to Siberia, when St Petersburg was only 171 km away!

Suddenly I knew that there was only one thing to do – escape again. The next day had to show some way.

The hours until the morning seemed endless, till at last a clear day dawned. As soon as the sun rose I left the barrack and lay down on a nearby meadow where I must have slept a while until the call to get tea water aroused me. After a very meagre breakfast (my good coffee was gone), I went to the commissar's office where I was told that the preparation of my papers would still take a few hours. I left my bag at the office and strolled into the street. Naturally I was drawn to the railway station. A goods train was just arriving. When I went closer to have a look the doors were thrown open and a number of Tartars jumped out. In each wagon there were horses and in the middle, a pile of fodder. A troop of militia appeared and started to search the train. They did not miss a single wagon and after only a few minutes a group of P.O.W.s and Russian stowaways stood gathered on the platform. An officer approached, barked at them and ordered the militia to take the arrested people away.

They had hardly vanished from the scene when I decided to take my chance. I asked the Tartars standing beside one of the cars whether they would allow me to enter and travel with them. Probably they understood my gestures better than my words and nodded a friendly approval. I took notice of the car number and hurried back for my bag, assuming that I had enough time. At the office I explained that I was invited by somebody for a cup of tea. There were no objections and 5 minutes later I arrived back at the station out of breath and full of anxiety. But the train was still there and the Tartars were still swarming around. I found my wagon and a second later had disappeared in a large pile of straw.

A few minutes later the Tartars also entered and the train started. Now I dared to crawl out of my hiding place. Talk with the Tartars proved to be rather difficult. However I understood the one important thing that the train went to Murmansk. I knew that the line to Murmansk branched off the St Petersburg line at Srianka, about 80 km from Tikhvin, and that I had to leave the train there. We travelled reasonably fast and arrived at Srianka at 3 a.m.

When I got out in the dark I soon realised that I was not the only one. Out of another wagon climbed three more stowaways and to

Comment [J20]: Location unknown.

Homecoming

my delight, they were German P.O.W.s. We got acquainted quickly, a Mr Stolz, a judge from Hannover stood out amongst them. They had left Siberia later than I and had met with comparatively few obstacles. As the night was cool we entered the station building and found a notice that Srianka belonged to the province of St Petersburg. Suddenly it came back to me, that within a province everybody was free to travel without documents. A ticket counter was open even at this later hour and we saw several peasants buying tickets for St Petersburg. Why should it not work for us? And it did! Only a few minutes later the rest of our money was gone and the tickets were in our hands. A train was to leave for St Petersburg early the same morning. We still had several hours to wait shivering on the floorboards until we boarded a real passenger car 3rd class.

In such comfort I had not travelled once during the 21 days from Yekaterinburg to Tikhvin. The journey took about 2 hours during which we wondered how it would be possible to go on from St Petersburg - a vital question. We decided that two of us should go into the town to look for ways to travel onwards, by land or sea, while the others waited at the station. We felt rather nervous when we delivered our tickets at the barrier, whether at the last moment some official would pounce on us. But nobody took any notice. We marched into the huge hall, settled down on the stone paving, fetched water from the "kipyatok", made tea etc. After the meal Stolz and one of the others went to reconnoitre.

Homecoming



St Isaac's Cathedral, St Petersburg



Nevsky Prospekt, near the Anichkov Palace, c. 1905

Transport Home

We reckoned on a long wait and were very astonished to see our scouts returning after only a few minutes. They told us full of excitement that they had found on the outside of the station a poster printed in German and Russian as follows:

"Members of the former Austrian and German armies who want to get transport home have to apply to the German revolutionary soviet of workers and soldiers, Petersburg, Moyka¹ 82."

Of course we had to rush outside to see for ourselves. It seemed too good to be true! The German workers and soldiers soviet sounded suspicious. Was it not perhaps a trap to get hold of loitering P.O.W.s in order to rid the starving, big city of them? They might send them back to the interior. Our doubts became so strong that we tried to suppress the joy and enthusiasm which had been our first reaction. The two now had to go to Moyka 82². This time they returned only after several hours, but radiant with joy. The soldier who was in charge of admittance at the entrance had given them all the necessary information and had warned them not to declare any military rank. He himself a German Sergeant Major said that every person known to be of rank would be sent without fail back to Moscow. The first transport to Germany had already left a fortnight ago; the next one was now in preparation.

There were no taxis or cabs in the vast square in front of the station, but only a number of two- and four-wheeled handcarts and a crowd of miserable looking poor devils who offered themselves as carriers. All of a sudden we felt great and hired a young lad with a cart to bring our bags to Moyka. As we had no money we offered him a capful of *suchari*, which he actually preferred. Thus we marched behind our cart, through many streets which aroused my interest, though I felt dead tired. The way took about an hour and led also over the famous Nevsky Prospekt³, the principal street of St Petersburg. In passing I saw the wonderful Kazan Cathedral⁴ with its half circular vestibule of columns. The elegant street

¹ (Мойка) – a small, 5km long, 40 meter wide river which encircles the central portion of St Petersburg; it derives its name from an Ingrian word for "slush".

² Now a vegetarian restaurant named 'The Idiot!' A Lonely Planet guidebook review begins with: "Dostoevsky loved this place!" boasts an advertisement for this atmospheric expat institution..."

³ (Невский проспект) – also called Nevsky Avenue, it was planned by Peter the Great as beginning the road to Novgorod and Moscow.

⁴ Also known as the Kazanskiy Kafedralniy Sobor or 'Cathedral of Our Lady of Kazan', it is a cathedral temple of the Russian Orthodox Church. Its construction began in 1801.

Homecoming

looked dead; the wooden paving was full of holes, the show windows empty and many of them nailed up with boards. There was little traffic and one saw only poorly dressed people.

Turning into Moyka, we came into a quiet noble street along a canal, with only distinguished looking houses and number 82 at which we soon arrived was one of the most outstanding, a real nobleman's *palais*.

We paid the boy, took our bags and full of expectations we entered our new home. A small elegant anteroom served for admission. We were registered and shown into the house. Once more we encountered a characteristic feature of the war. There they were, the poor ragged and haggard P.O.W.s lying on the *parquet*, or wandering about in the splendid rooms and galleries, ornate with mirrors, goblins, gildings and still some rich but not too tasteful furniture. We could settle anywhere. I took hold of a small carpet, rolled it up, lay down on it and completely exhausted, fell asleep.

I do not know how long I sleep but awakening with a start I found myself surrounded by a crowd. Bending over me stood a medical orderly in a white coat, a thermometer in his hand. He asked me whether I was ill as I was trembling so much in my sleep that the others became afraid of infection with typhus, which would exclude them from the transport home. I answered that it was nothing but weakness as I had only two days ago recovered from undulant fever. The result was that I got a clean bed with white sheets in the sick bay. The following days I spent mostly asleep, interrupted only by meals and a few walks through the town.

The German legation¹ designed by Peter Behrens² made the greatest impression on me among all the monumental buildings, although the bronze horses of the crowning quadriga³ had been removed and the windows boarded up. Compared with it, the baroque and classicist buildings on the same square seemed unconvincing. There I also saw the enormous St Isaac's Cathedral⁴ which to my mind completely lacked any artistic value, in spite of its gigantic masses and its extraordinary richness and pomp of

¹ A legation was the term used in diplomacy to denote a diplomatic representative office lower than an embassy. The distinction was dropped following WWII.

² A famous German architect, he was considered to have been the world's first 'industrial designer'.

³ A car or chariot drawn by four horses abreast, several famous quadriga sculptures exist in St Petersburg.

⁴ St Isaac's is a Late Neoclassical rendering of a Byzantine Greek-cross church. The cathedral was completed in 1858 after 40 years of construction.

Homecoming

materials. I enjoyed beautiful sights along the Neva¹ and in Nevsky Prospekt around the Kazan Cathedral. A young art historian was kind enough to show me through the treasures of the Hermitage². My hope to see the famous imperial picture gallery was however in vain. During the war the whole collection had been brought out of danger to Moscow and at present the two towns were quarrelling whether it should be returned or not. In the meantime the Hermitage had been filled with objects of art formerly owned by the nobility, wealthy citizens and the church. To see these things was very much worthwhile, especially for somebody who had been starved of art for years.

While we walked around, my guide told me about his life as a soviet official. The working conditions were excellent, his salary minute, as were his food rations, but he was able to increase the latter by means which were widely employed. He got himself registered as working also at some other places and drew rations from there too. One day I watched a parade in honour of the red officers. I was standing near one of the bands which were placed on one side of the square. Most of the musicians were Germans.

On the third day the exciting news arrived: tomorrow we depart for Reval³. This sounded so wonderful that I, who had been disappointed so often, decided not to believe it before I was actually in the train. But this time it was true. The next morning there was a great roll call, endless counting and arranging until finally, after hours, we marched in military order to a small railway station at the periphery of the town. Here we were joined by Austrians and Hungarians who were far more numerous and had been housed on a ship on the Neva. Again we had to wait for hours, worrying all the time that some obstacle might still interfere, but in the end were conducted to a long goods train which we entered. With a sigh of relief, we felt the train move and a great wave of hope and joy surged up in us.

The journey to the Estonian border⁴, about 120 kilometres, lasted more than 24 hours and in our excitement and impatience we could

¹ A river flowing between Lake Ladoga (the largest lake in Europe) and Neva Bay in the Gulf of Finland. St Petersburg is one of four major cities situated on the Neva.

² The State Hermitage is one of the largest and oldest museums in the world. It was founded in 1764 by Catherine the Great, has nearly 3 million items in its collection, and includes the largest collection of paintings in the world.

³ Reval is the previously used German name for 'Tallinn', the capital and largest city of Estonia.

⁴ Estonia had only just fought its war of independence from Russia (as a part of the Russian Civil War) which ended in February 1920 with the Peace Treaty of Tartu.

Homecoming

neither settle down nor sleep. In the next afternoon the train came to a halt at a barbed wire entanglement. Russian soldiers guarded a gap which was left for the passage of trains. We passed slowly through and saw not far away another entanglement, guarded by soldiers in different uniforms. We had passed the Russian border and were now in the neutral zone. A Russian officer with some officials checked our luggage. It was forbidden to take gold and jewels out of the country. The inspection was followed by another roll call in the presence of a Swiss Colonel who now took charge of us prisoners, or rather, liberated ones. When everything was fixed, the journey went on and half an hour later at the beginning of dusk we arrived at Narva¹.

In a long column we marched up through the streets to one of the ancient castles, which looked down upon the old town from steep rocky heights. In the castle we could move freely. After a meal, again a thorough delousing took place, which lasted the greater part of the night. I was utterly exhausted. Just six days had passed since I had got up from the undulant fever and how much had happened to me during those few days!

It was a lovely hazy morning when we marched down again. The town below was bathed in pink sunlight and so was the second castle on the other side of the river. We felt extremely happy and even some anxiety about how we would find everything at home, but it could not dampen this happiness. News had been very scarce; the last letter which had reached me at Novo Archangelsk was then nine months old. What might not have happened since then? The streets were still empty. There was hardly a soul to take notice of us. Further and further down we marched until we reached the river, where we boarded the two big barges which were waiting for us, and soon we were towed away by a small tug. The rising sun was slowly, dissolving the morning mist. Silently the barges glided downstream between gently rising hills, covered with beech trees in their spring foliage, a sight of breathtaking beauty.

I can't remember how long it took until the open sea, calm and shining like a mirror spread out before us. We did not stop at the little town of Hungerburg² at the mouth of the river, but went straight out to sea, where in the distance a fine big steamer was lying at anchor. When we came closer we could read the name

¹ The third-largest city in Estonia, located on the Russian border on the Narva River.

² Hungerburg is the German name for Narva-Jõesuu, an Estonian town located on the Baltic Sea coast at the mouth of the Narva River.

Homecoming

"Ceuta", and saw the German flag and that of the Oldenburg-Portuguese Shipping Company. People were waving to us. Speedily we went aboard and were shown to our wooden bunks. There followed now a voyage of three days in beautiful sunshine with much eating, sleeping and lounging on deck. The captain was the first to tell us about conditions in Germany.

The "Ceuta" was about 6000 tons and the biggest ship left to the Germans after the Treaty of Versailles. Leaving the sea we went up the charming river Swine¹. The country in the sunshine with its willows, cattle and clean villages seemed to us like a picture from paradise. On the 31st of May 1920 we arrived in Swinemünde², where a band welcomed us at the wharf with the tune of the beautiful song "*Wem Gott will rechte Gunst erweisen, den schickt er in die weite Welt*" (Those to whom God will show a special favour He will send into the wide, wide world).

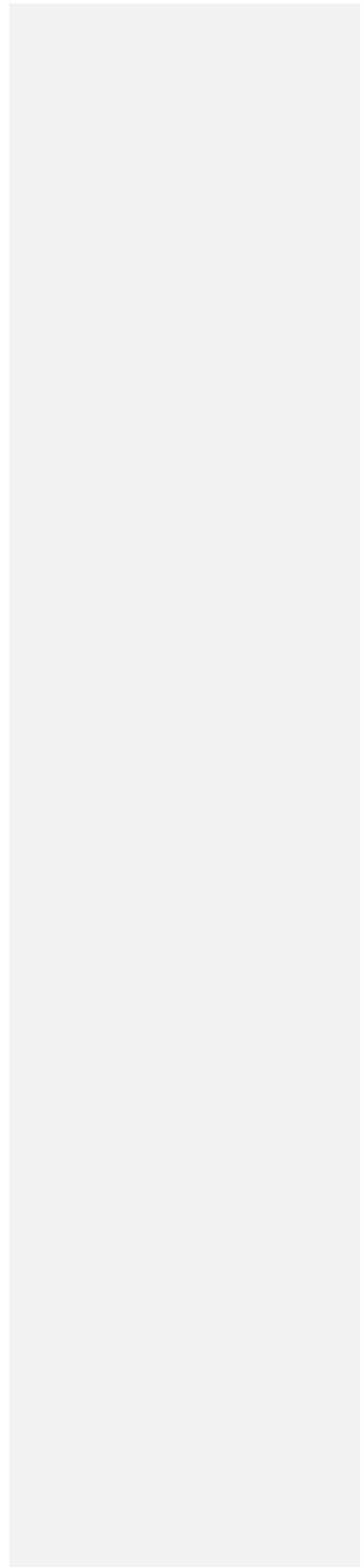
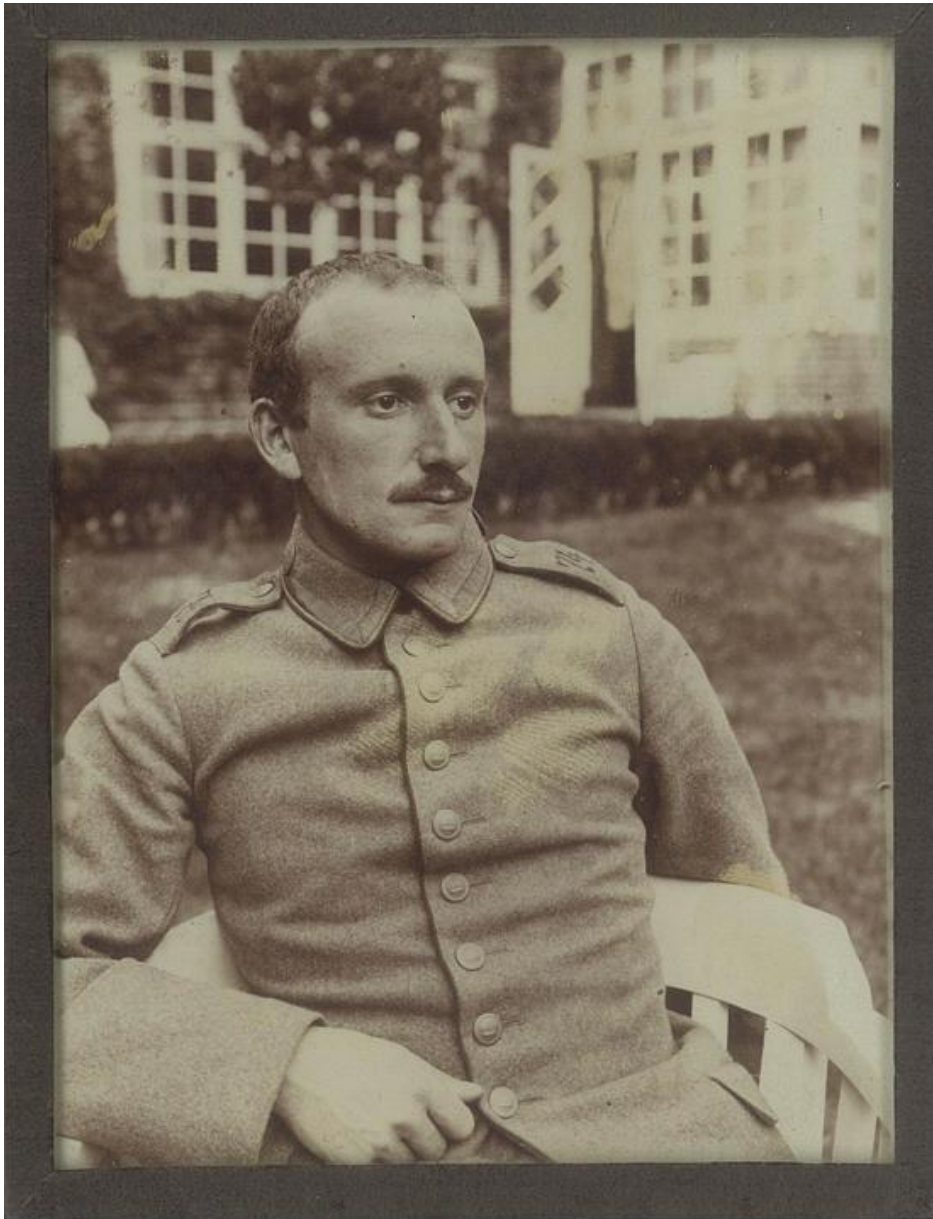
We still had to spend a few days in quarantine in Hammerstein³ in western Prussia, and on the 5th of June all my beloved ones were at the station in Hamburg to receive me.

¹ The Świna is a river in what is now Poland that flows between the Oder Lagoon and the Baltic Sea.

² Świnoujście is a Polish city situated on the Świna River. At the time that Opa was making his way home, it was part of the Free State of Prussia (post WWI).

³ Hammerstein is the German name for the town of Czarne in what is now Poland. Somewhat ironically, the German Army built a large POW camp in Czarne for housing Russian prisoners during WWI.

Homecoming



Homecoming

