

GULAG BOSS

A Soviet Memoir

Fyodor Vasilevich Mochulsky

Translated and edited by Deborah Kaple

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide.

Oxford New York
Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in
Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece
Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore
South Korea Switzerland Thailand Turkey Ukraine Vietnam

Oxford is a registered trade mark of Oxford University Press
in the UK and certain other countries.

Published in the United States of America by
Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

© Oxford University Press 2011

First issued as an Oxford University Press paperback, 2012.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press, or as expressly permitted by law, by license, or under terms agreed with the appropriate reproduction rights organization. Inquiries concerning reproduction outside the scope of the above should be sent to the Rights Department, Oxford University Press, at the address above.

You must not circulate this work in any other form
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Mochulsky, Fyodor Vasilevich, 1919–1999.
Gulag boss : a Soviet memoir / by Fyodor Vasilevich Mochulsky ;
translated and edited by Deborah Kaple.
p. cm. Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 978-0-19-974266-0 (hardcover); 978-0-19-993486-7 (paperback)
1. Mochulsky, Fyodor Vasilevich, 1919–1999. 2. Soviet Union. Narodnyĭ
komissariat vnutrennikh del—Officials and employees—Biography.
3. Prisons—Soviet Union—Officials and employees—Biography.
4. Soviet Union—History—1925–1953—Biography. 5. Glavnoe upravlenie
ispravitel'no-trudovykh lagereĭ OGPU—History. 6. Concentration camps—Russia
(Federation)—Pechora River Region—History—20th century. 7. Political prisoners—Russia
(Federation)—Pechora River Region—History—20th century.
8. Political prisoners—Russia (Federation)—Pechora River Region—
Social conditions—20th century. 9. Forced labor—Russia (Federation)—
Pechora River Region—History—20th century.
10. Pechora River Region (Russia)—History—20th century.
I. Kaple, Deborah A. II. Title.
DK268.M59A3 2010 365'.45092—dc22 [B] 201[000]7440

Frontispiece: First assignment in the Gulag: Mochulsky as unit boss and foreman in Pernashor, north of the Arctic Circle, winter 1940–41

Thüringer Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek
22. MAI 2019
- JENA -

In memory of all who suffered in the Gulag

Musee des Beaux Arts

About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;

How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood:
They never forgot
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Brueghel's *Icarus,* for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

W.H. Auden, December 1938

CONTENTS

Introduction by Deborah Kaple
[xv]

Preface by Fyodor Mochulsky
[xxxv]

PART I
Gulag from the Outside

CHAPTER 1
The NKVD
Villain or Protector?
[3]

CHAPTER 2
First Acquaintance with GULAG NKVD
Meeting at the Central Committee of the CPSU
[6]

CHAPTER 3
Meeting in the Cadres Department of GULAG NKVD
[10]

CHAPTER 4
Forty-five Days to Pechorlag
[13]

PART II
Gulag from the Inside

CHAPTER 5
At the Camp Administration
[25]

CHAPTER 6
Unit Foreman, First Contingent of Prisoners
Soviet Volunteer Ski Troops from the Finnish War
[31]

CHAPTER 7
The Unit Bosses
[45]

CHAPTER 8
A Change in Leadership at Pechorlag
[49]

CHAPTER 9
Transferred to the 93rd Unit
Labor Force: Hardened Criminals
[52]

CHAPTER 10
Attempted Prisoner Revolt in the 93rd Unit
[58]

CHAPTER 11
Boss and Foreman at the 95th Unit
Labor Force: Political Prisoners
[64]

CHAPTER 12
Threat of Arrest
[70]

CHAPTER 13
The War
[75]

CHAPTER 14
Illness
[84]

CHAPTER 15
Recovery and Return to Work in the Southern Part of the Camp
[90]

CHAPTER 16
Boss of a Militarized Section
Labor Force: Captured German Prisoners of War
[97]

CHAPTER 17
Boss of a Railway Division
Labor Force: Professional Railwaymen
[104]

CHAPTER 18
The "Liberated" Secretary of the Communist
Youth Organization
[109]

CHAPTER 19
Fascist Military Landing Force
[118]

CHAPTER 20
Deputy Boss in the Political Department for Komsomol Work
at the NKVD's Road-Building Camp No. 3
[123]

PART III
Interesting Asides

CHAPTER 21
Some Railroad Recollections
[137]

CHAPTER 22
Peschanka, a Village of Dekulakized People
on the River Pechora
[140]

CHAPTER 23
The Countryside of Komi on the River Usa
[143]

CHAPTER 24
Women at Pechorlag
[147]

CHAPTER 25
A Fellow Traveler from Abez to Pechora
[156]

PART IV
Final Words

CHAPTER 26
The End of My Story
[165]

CHAPTER 27
The Real Essence of the Gulag
[168]

Afterword
The Nature of Memoir
[173]

APPENDIX 1
Pretexts for Arrest under Lenin and Stalin
[183]

APPENDIX 2
Article 58 of the RSFSR Criminal Code
[189]

APPENDIX 3
Glossary
[195]

Acknowledgments
[197]

Notes
[199]

Selected Bibliography
[219]

Index
[227]

INTRODUCTION

Deborah Kaple

This is one man's story of work and survival in Pechorlag, an outpost of Stalin's Gulag situated north of the Arctic Circle. Fyodor Vasilevich Mochulsky (1918–1999) was not a prisoner in a Gulag camp; he was an employee. Unlike the famous accounts by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Evgeniia Ginzberg, Varlam Shalamov,[1] and others, this story is told by an employee of the NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs) who worked as a boss in charge of several units of convicts in the 1940s. In the Gulag literature, memoirs written by camp bosses are rare. *Gulag Boss* is the first account of the Gulag from a "management" point of view to be published in English.

In 1940, Mochulsky was a twenty-two-year-old student at a transport engineering institute and a candidate member of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). As a party member, he was recruited as an engineer to work in the Gulag to help construct a 500-kilometer-long railroad line over permafrost. Although he was sent to work as a foreman, upon arrival at the forced labor camp he found himself thrown into the role of boss because of the lack of personnel.[2] In this memoir, he describes the lives and concerns of the Gulag staff, NKVD guards, and Communist Party cadres during the years 1940 to 1946. As a GULAG NKVD[3] employee and not a prisoner, Mochulsky provides a new perspective on the particular evil of the Gulag. His story brings us again to the age-old question of how apparently "ordinary men" can participate in extraordinarily evil actions.[4]

GULAG is an acronym for the words *Glavnoe Upravlenie Lagerei*, or Main Administration of Camps. Although it is extremely difficult to establish how many camps existed, scholars have found evidence in the Russian archives of approximately 478 large and small camps in 1940. This included 53 corrective labor camps, a network of 425 corrective labor colonies, as well as various prisons and "special settlements."[5] Between 1928 and 1953, the Soviet government saw these camps and colonies as a significant labor source for the building of Soviet socialism.[6] Although it is exceedingly difficult to estimate the numbers of victims of the Stalinist repression, scholars estimate that between 20 million and 28.7 million people served time in the Gulag (including special exiles).[7] As to the number of victims, some scholars feel that in the years 1921–1953, as many as 7 million executions took place, others say 2.7 million perished, while documentable executions account for around 1.1 million deaths.[8] We do know from hundreds of disparate accounts, that thousands of people were summarily shot, or died in transit during long treks across the USSR and are therefore not accounted for in any ledgers.[9] And we also know now that during the war years one of every four Gulag prisoners died annually.[10]

Despite the extent of the murder and abuse that Russian survivors documented in innumerable books, memoirs and articles, as well as the excellent academic work starting in the 1940s in the West,[11] Stalin's Gulag nevertheless remains shrouded in mystery for many outside of academia. The Gulag was very much the creature of the secret police that dominated life in the Soviet Union for much of its existence.[12] Shortly after the Bolsheviks took power in 1917, Lenin himself advocated carrying out "merciless mass terror" and forcing the fledgling regime's enemies into concentration camps.[13] Thus the newly created Soviet police apparatus quickly began to oversee the new government's prisons and labor camps. The secret police were crucial to maintaining the Communist Party's tight grip on Soviet society.[14] Both Lenin and Stalin used this organization extensively to eliminate real and perceived enemies. In 1928, when Stalin introduced the massive industrialization and collectivization programs of the First Five-Year Plan, the NKVD expanded its role to ensure fulfillment of his goals.

The secret police not only ran the prisons and the Gulag's system of forced labor, but it carried out extra-legal mass arrests and executions, detained persons believed to be hostile to the government, rounded up thousands of peasants and non-Russians in the USSR and sent them to

special settlements in remote areas of the country, guarded state borders, and even made Gulag propaganda films under Stalin.[15]

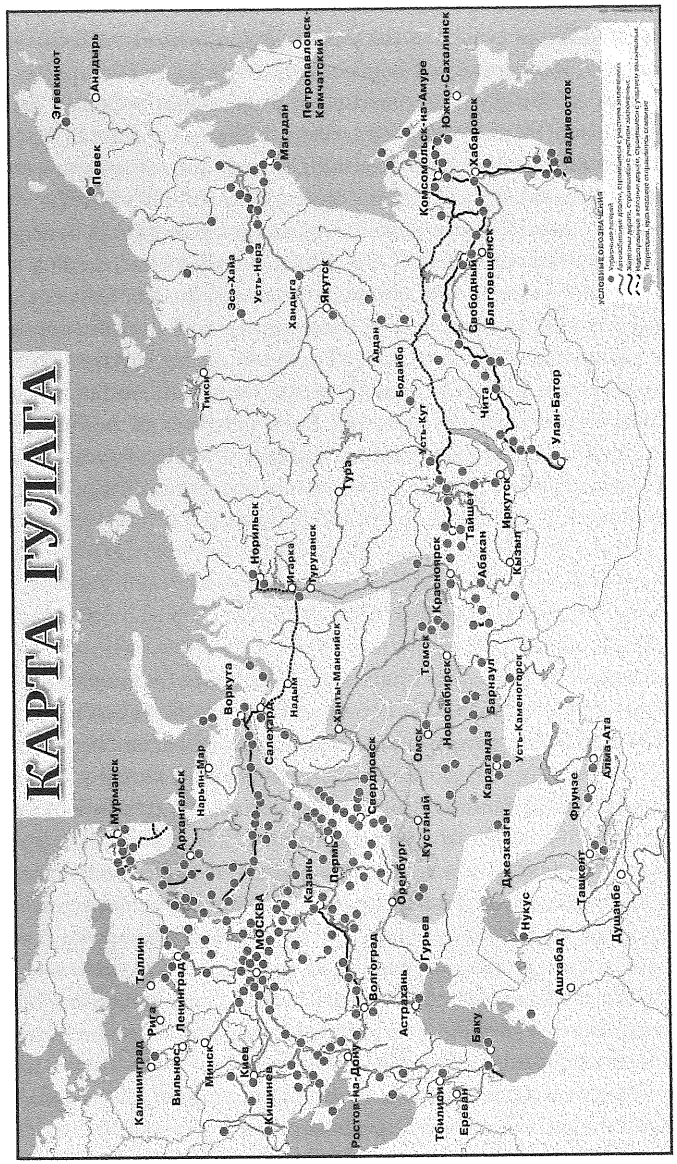
GULAG NKVD was crucial in the push toward the modernization of the country that was central to Stalin's vision. Forced labor camps were an integral part of the gigantic construction projects that became a hallmark of Stalinism. Many Soviet cities, dams, bridges, canals, rail lines, factories and mines, and even the beautiful Moscow subway system, were all built using slave labor provided and managed by GULAG NKVD.

For decades, the USSR government went to great lengths to conceal the NKVD's involvement in Soviet life. Today, thanks to the opening of the archives of the former Soviet Union in the 1990s, the NKVD's central role has become clearer. Certainly, we better understand the enormity of the human tragedy that was the Gulag. The Soviet Gulag surely ranks as one of the most evil political creations of the twentieth century, along with Hitler's Holocaust in Europe, Pol Pot's slaughter of millions in Cambodia, and Mao Zedong's serial campaigns that killed millions of Chinese citizens. The Gulag stands alone as the longest-running program of state-sponsored killing in that very bloody century.[16]

THE SECRET WORLD

Most Soviet citizens knew that there was a "separate country behind barbed wires" in the former USSR. People spoke of the *malenkaia zona*, or "little zone" (the Gulag camps) and the *bolshaia zona*, or the "big zone" (the USSR as one big Gulag camp).[17] The writer and Gulag survivor Varlam Shalamov commented that everyone was "constantly aware of the gaping jaws of the Gulag threatening to devour us."[18] But the Gulag's very enormity and the fear of terror led to a generally understood silence among Soviet citizens. Today some scholars feel that the damage to the Russian national psyche was not limited to the millions who served time in the camps or their families. The Gulag as an institution harmed social relations by normalizing government-sponsored violence, spreading terror, universalizing mutual suspicion, and fostering paranoid secrecy even among close friends and family members.[19]

In the West, survivor memoirs began appearing in the 1930s.[20] Although a number of academic specialists were interested in understanding the scope and importance of the Gulag during the Soviet period, hard data were sketchy, and allegations were not easily proved.



This map shows the most developed Gulag camps of the USSR (many more existed for which we have no data). Courtesy of the Memorial Society, Moscow, 1989.

During Stalin's time, there was an almost complete blackout of real information, and in its place a sophisticated propaganda machine assured many that Soviet socialism was correct and on track. In addition, even official legislation concerning the Gulag was not always publicly known, so neither Soviet citizens nor the international community understood exactly what was happening.[21] It is important also to remember that there were many adherents of socialism in the West in those days.[22] These influential people either believed in Stalin and kept quiet about any real or suspected negative aspects of Soviet life, or simply felt that the idea of socialism was important enough to be supported, no matter the costs.[23] It would be easy to judge these people when we look at events through today's eyes, but we need to keep in mind that the Soviet government was incredibly successful at hiding the truth.[24] Ignorance may be no excuse, but it makes the decades of silence more comprehensible.

This pervasive secrecy made studying even apparently banal aspects of Soviet life very difficult. For example, I worked for a few years as a Soviet transportation specialist at Wharton Econometrics. I published scholarly articles on rail transport in the USSR, and I was surrounded by the best experts in the field. Yet until the 1990s, very little in the available Soviet literature led us to believe that GULAG NKVD had built and maintained the Soviet transportation system. Revisiting the pre-1990s scholarly literature on Soviet transport, I found few references to the NKVD, forced labor, or the Gulag.[25] Yet a recently discovered Soviet government memo dated January 2, 1940, revealed that the Politburo approved the organization of the Chief Administration of Camps for Railroad Construction, within the NKVD. From then on, until Stalin's death in 1953, this division of the NKVD built all the rail lines in the USSR. They did this using Gulag labor.[26] It is now somewhat difficult to recall the extent to which even the most committed scholars of the Soviet system had to work through suppositions, inferences, and guesses to try to understand what was happening in the USSR.[27]

Mochulsky himself, a party member in 1940, had a very sketchy understanding of the Gulag before he arrived at Pechorlag. He writes that he believed what he'd heard and seen in the Soviet press: that the Gulag transformed criminals into honest citizens through hard labor. A high-ranking CPSU apparatchik clarified how the subterfuge was carried out. He explained that every Gulag camp had two names. The real name of his camp was Pechorlag, literally "Pechor" for the Pechora River and "lag" for *lager*, or camp. But if the camp were ever mentioned in the

press, it would always be called Pechorstroi, "stroi" being the word for construction site. To anyone outside of the Gulag system, Mochulsky needed to say that he was stationed at a construction site. There would be little reason to associate his job with a prison labor camp.

WHO WAS FYODOR MOCHULSKY?

I first met Fyodor Mochulsky in 1992. I had gone to Moscow to take advantage of the opening of the Communist Party archives for a book I was researching about the Soviet Advisors Program.[28] My work in the archives did not go well, mostly because the archivists were reluctant to let me tell a story that ended badly, in their eyes, with the Sino-Soviet split in 1959. In desperation, I did a very American thing: I placed an advertisement in two daily newspapers, *Pravda* and *Moskovskaia Pravda* (*Moscow Pravda*), asking to interview people who had been sent as advisors to China in the 1950s. My Russian friends warned me that no one would answer such an advertisement, but actually, a few hundred citizens called to offer their stories.[29]

Mochulsky was one of these respondents, and I chose to interview him because of his work advising the Chinese on ideological and Communist Party matters. After his job at GULAG NKVD, he served as a diplomat in China. He later took another job with the NKVD, by then called the KGB, to work at the CPSU Central Committee. He was intelligent and knowledgeable, and in the course of our many meetings, we became friendly. Our friendship was largely based on a mutual interest in China. Not until nearly the end of my year in Moscow did he tell me about his Gulag memoir. He had written the memoir after he had retired from the USSR Foreign Ministry in 1988. His family says that he often spoke about the Gulag and his work there because the experience deeply troubled him all his life.[30] During the late 1990s, the years that might be called the "repentance/confessional" glasnost years, he sat down and wrote out his reminiscences.[31]

In the early 1990s, Mochulsky attempted to publish his memoir in Russia, but he never found a publisher. This was a time of great change in Russia, and everyone was looking forward to the new, post-Communist future, so his story detailing how the NKVD ran the Gulag camps found no takers. In the end, he brought the manuscript to me, along with photos he had taken, and asked me to translate and publish it in English.

I was taken aback to realize that this apparently pleasant and affable man had been part of a system I already associated with terror, but I accepted the manuscript. For many years it sat on a shelf, as other professional and personal obligations claimed my attention. But with time, and in the face of an apparent rehabilitation of Stalin's legacy in Putin's Russia, I realized that this was a story that needed to be told.[32]

THE GULAG RISES: A BRIEF HISTORY

Vladimir Lenin, the founder of the Soviet state and the genius behind the Communist takeover of Russia in 1917, established the first secret police just weeks after the Bolshevik Revolution. Known as the Cheka (which means Extraordinary Commission), its original purpose was to guard the Petrograd site of the Bolshevik Revolution. It was not long before the new regime experienced major opposition, and the Cheka was ordered to pursue all "enemies of Soviet power" and throw them into prisons.[33] As Marxists, the Bolsheviks distinguished the class of a person and used class labels to carry out mass arrests. By 1918, the year Mochulsky was born, these early Soviet prisons already housed a sizable population, mostly opponents of the Bolsheviks, as well as a number of common criminals.[34] By the end of 1920, there were eighty-four camps in forty-three provinces of the RSFSR.[35] In 1923, the OGPU (precursor to the NKVD) founded Solovki, a prison labor camp complex housed in a former monastery on several islands in the White Sea. This was the first camp where the secret police learned to use prison labor for profit.[36]

Several key events in the late 1920s and early 1930s (after Lenin's death and Stalin's rise to absolute power) helped shape the Gulag. Among these were the Bolshevik policy of grain requisition and "dekulakization," which meant the arrest and deportation of the *relatively* prosperous peasants (labeled "kulaks," or fists, in Russian) who resisted the state's forced seizure of their grain; the organization of the first major corrective labor camps and special settlements in remote areas; and a June 27, 1929, law by which the Politburo created a network of self-supporting camps to replace the existing system of prisons. The Politburo stated that the task of the camps was to colonize remote areas of the country and "develop mineral deposits using convict labor."[37] Then, in October 1928, Stalin announced the First Five-Year Plan, which included forced

collectivization in the countryside and rapid industrial development in the country.

Collectivization of agriculture was accompanied by mass arrests, executions, and the deportation of peasants, primarily the more prosperous ones, village intelligentsia, and priests.[38] In the cities, the secret police sought out all "counterrevolutionary organizations," the intelligentsia, and the so-called bourgeois specialists (the management class that was trained before the Bolshevik Revolution). Those arrested were sent to the Gulag, exiled far from their homes, or shot. Millions were killed and deported in these grand schemes to change Russia overnight, and the resultant ruinous famine in the early 1930s killed millions more.[39]

In the 1930s, Stalin built on the prison system by simultaneously expanding the camp network and exploiting prisoners as slave labor for his gigantic economic programs. State-sponsored NKVD terror led to a huge increase in the number of prisoners in the Gulag.[40] Between 1929 and 1953, a sizable cross-section of the Soviet (and foreign) population passed through the Gulag, as the prison system filled with people arrested on trumped-up charges.[41] Russian estimates are that between 1931 and 1953, about 3.8 million people were arrested for generic "counterrevolutionary" crimes, of whom 786,000 were simply shot. During the Great Terror of 1937–1938, approximately 1.6 million people were arrested, and more than half of them were shot (this would mean roughly fifteen hundred daily executions).[42] We now know that local NKVD officers were given a quota of people to arrest or execute, an order they often proudly overfulfilled.[43]

Mochulsky lived through the Great Terror as a young man. He recalls how the Soviet government justified the witch hunts and mass arrests in his native Belorussia. Excuses for this violence appeared in the press every day: geopolitical "realities," capitalist encirclement, and what the Soviets felt was an international hostility to the building of socialism in the USSR. The relentless propaganda against "Enemies of the People" was enough to lead many to suspect that real opponents to socialism existed and that the NKVD was simply protecting the motherland.

The Gulag continued to grow, coming into its own with enormous, remarkable projects that impressed both Russians and foreign observers with their size and the speed with which they were built. The first prison-labor showcase was the White Sea Canal (called Belomor in Russian), begun in mid-1930. Stalin demanded that the canal be built in twenty months using the most primitive equipment and tools. More than one

hundred thousand convicts worked on the canal, and many perished. Although the canal ended up not being very useful, it was immortalized in a propaganda book of vignettes edited by the prominent writer Maxim Gorky.[44] It was a project of which Stalin was enormously proud.[45] By mid-1931, the NKVD was the USSR's largest construction organization.

On the basis of the "success" of Belomor, NKVD slave labor camps began to be built across the nation. For instance, in November 1931 a Politburo directive ordered the NKVD to form a Gulag camp in the far east, in Kolyma; in September 1932, the NKVD took over the construction of the canal linking the Volga and Moscow Rivers; in October 1932, the NKVD moved into the construction of the Baikal-Amur Railroad in the far east. In October 1932, the NKVD also formed the Ukhta-Pechora Trust to organize coal and oil production and develop other resources in the Pechora basin.[46] This was the area that included the camp that Mochulsky describes in his memoir.

During this frightening time of "terror by quota," the Mochulsky family was very lucky. When Fyodor was young, and the family still lived in Minsk, his father worked as a senior research fellow at the Institute of Belorussian Culture. When Fyodor's father sensed that he was about to be purged (because his boss, a prestigious professor, was arrested on bogus charges), the family left their native Belorussia for Moscow. There, young Mochulsky went to work in a factory, after which he entered an institute to study railroad engineering.[47]

In 1939 the Soviet Union, anticipating the coming war in Europe, signed a nonaggression pact with Nazi Germany. This agreement had the incidental effect of adding thousands of new prisoners to the Soviet Union's slave labor camps. As the Soviet government moved in to take over parts of the countries allowed it by the secret protocols of the Nazi-Soviet Pact, the NKVD arrested huge numbers of non-Russian "enemies of Soviet power." The period between September 1939 and the Nazi invasion in June 1941 saw a huge increase in the number of prisoners sent to the Gulag due to these territorial acquisitions as well as to prisoners taken during the Winter War with Finland.[48]

Mochulsky was to see this influx of foreigners into the prison camps for himself in 1940, with the arrival of Polish and Finnish prisoners at Pechorlag.[49] Mochulsky's camp was in the vicinity of Vorkuta in the Pechora Basin, which contained massive coal and other mineral deposits critical to the Soviet war effort. Given fears of the coming war with the Germans, the Soviet government planned to build a new railroad that

would provide access to these underground riches far from any possible invasion route. Transporting the coal out of the Pechora Basin and back into the central part of Russia was Stalin's hope for surviving the war. Pechorlag was deemed so important to winning the war that it was designated a "camp of military significance." Later this would be useful to the bosses, who could demand extraordinary sacrifices from the prisoners.

The memory of these sacrifices is still painful today, as Russian scholars now believe that the Gulag was neither economically viable nor very helpful to the economy.[50] From new archival research, we know that Gulag labor was poorly used and sadly mismanaged. Gulag management often risked lives building structures that were not feasible and often later abandoned these projects. The use of "cheap" labor in the form of prisoners encouraged the regime to recklessly build whatever they fancied. Oleg Khlevniuk, one of Russia's most respected Gulag researchers, says it best: "Many prisoner-built projects were difficult, or almost impossible, to build with free workers, but was there a need to build them at all?"[51] In the end, the contribution of Gulag labor to the Soviet economy is questionable, especially given the enormous human costs.

In 1940 Mochulsky and other NKVD "civilians"[52] who were to work in the camp, along with many convicts, made an arduous forty-five-day journey from Moscow. When they arrived to start building the new rail line, they found few settlements and almost no roads. Their camp consisted of nothing but prisoners living outdoors. Despite the lack of facilities, the prisoners continued to arrive. During Mochulsky's time at Pechorlag, the prisoner population ballooned. In January 1940, when he arrived, there were thirty-eight hundred prisoners at Pechorlag. A year later, there were already thirty-five thousand prisoners, and by June 1941 there were ninety-two thousand.[53] Inmates from all over the USSR and eastern Europe flooded in every day.

The war years were horrific for the Soviet Union, particularly so for those in the Gulag. The situation for prisoners deteriorated greatly as the government reduced the amount of food rations and increased the number of hours prisoners worked, and prisoner mortality was high. The Soviet government organized penal battalions to fight at the front, especially in 1942 and 1943, causing the total Gulag camp population to drop by a million.[54] After the war, a new wave of people was repressed (arrested), and the prison population grew again. The NKVD continued work on its own building and construction projects, with the Gulag supplying the necessary convict labor all across the country.

After the war, Stalin pushed the Soviet people to quickly rebuild and help the country recover from the ravages it had suffered. Prison labor was active in mining and infrastructure construction such as railroad building, and large hydraulic-engineering projects, such as the Volga-Don, Volga-Baltic, and Turkmen Canals and the Kuibyshev and Stalingrad hydroelectric stations. All of this work continued until shortly after Stalin's death on March 5, 1953, when NKVD chief Lavrentii Beria proposed dismantling the Gulag.[55] A broad amnesty freed about 1 million prisoners, with the remaining 2.5 million transferred from the NKVD to the Ministry of Justice. Beria himself was arrested in the months following Stalin's death, and executed in December 1953. (The two previous NKVD chiefs, Genrikh Yagoda and Nikolai Yezhov, had suffered similar fates.)

PECHORLAG: THE ZONE

Pechorlag, the camp where Mochulsky worked, was located in the Komi ASSR, situated northeast of St. Petersburg and west of the Ural Mountains. This territory of mostly taiga and tundra reaches, in some parts, above the Arctic Circle.[56] Anne Applebaum has said that Komi was "one vast camp," for prisoners built all of the region's major cities, its railways and roads, and all of its original industrial infrastructure.[57] The indigenous Komi were herders, fishermen, and hunters; indeed Mochulsky's only contacts with them concerned buying a reindeer carcass, and witnessing how they trapped birds for food.

The administrative structure of Pechorlag was situated in a town at the southern end called Abez. The camp was divided into three regions roughly along a North–South axis. Within each region, there were several numbered departments and within these departments were the units, each of which included hundreds of convicts and their living quarters. Mochulsky was first assigned to the Third Region, 6th Department, Unit Pernashor, at the very northern tip of this long administrative structure, above the Arctic Circle.

Each region, department, and unit of every prison labor camp was staffed with NKVD employees. There was also a parallel Communist Party structure of authority to exercise "party control" over the camp. In Mochulsky's unit, the NKVD employees consisted of the members of the security platoon, the boss of the unit, and the unit foreman. The one

non-NKVD Communist Party employee worked as the political instructor. Mochulsky, as an NKVD employee and party member, had two bosses: the NKVD and the Communist Party.

At Pechorlag, as in most Gulag camps, the convicts were housed according to their criminal status. Thus, as Mochulsky was transferred from unit to unit within the camp, his labor force changed. Sometimes, his workers were political prisoners; in others they were ordinary criminals. Anyone arrested for a real crime, such as robbery or rape, was known as a "nonpolitical" prisoner. The others, arrested mostly under the catch-all category of Article 58 of the criminal code for "counterrevolutionary crimes," were known as "politicals" or "58ers."[58]

ON THE INSIDE: THE CONVICT EXPERIENCE OF THE GULAG

In this memoir, Mochulsky focuses on the civilian employees who worked in the Gulag. We have no other accounts of "civilian life" in the Gulag, so this is of inherent interest. However, since he relates the civilian story almost exclusively, he does not describe in detail the lives of the prisoners with whom he worked. The difference between Mochulsky's and the convicts' experience, of course, is that the civilian employees went to the Gulag for a job, while the prisoners were mostly arrested on false charges and sentenced via nonlegal means.

For instance, when the CPSU proposed the Gulag job to Mochulsky, he was about to graduate from a transport engineering school in Moscow. He was invited to the CPSU Central Committee's main office, where they spoke to him in grandiose language and treated him with respect. Although he had no choice but to take the job, he was not directly coerced. Contrast this with the experience of one Yelena Sidorkina, a party member and the editor of a local newspaper. She was arrested in 1937, charged with belonging to a "bourgeois nationalist counterrevolutionary organization." She described the experience in her memoir:

> The interrogations started. I was questioned day and night for seventy-two hours. I was forbidden to stand and walk around, let alone sleep. The interrogators changed every five or six hours, and each demanded that I confess my counterrevolutionary activities. Again I denied all the charges: I had never engaged in counterrevolutionary activities, even in my head. "All enemies of the people say that," they replied, and produced a number of stunning accusations.... I denied all these fabrications.
>
> ...I was exhausted and unable to keep my eyes open. But the moment my eyelids started to droop, the guards would shout, "Stand up! Sit down! Stand up! Sit down!" Then it started up again.... Every so often they would offer me something to eat. Some bread, gruel, and tea were brought in, but I could eat nothing. Shoving these slops at me, they would smack their lips over white bread and glasses of cocoa or tea with lemon, then ostentatiously push their plates aside. "What's the matter, Yelena Yemelyanovna?" they would sneer. "Why aren't you eating?" After three days and nights of continuous interrogation, I was virtually unconscious. I suppose I must have signed something, but for the life of me to this day I cannot remember what."[59]

Mochulsky had some difficult moments on his way to Pechorlag, which he details in chapter 4, but his journey was not the same as the convicts' harrowing, often deathly experience. Evgeniia Ginzberg's trip to the gold mines of Kolyma took a month. During the month of July, she and hundreds of other prisoners were crammed into a hot rail car marked "Special Equipment." She recalls, "The roof of the car was red-hot and the nights were not long enough to cool it. While the train was in motion, the car door was left open a hand's breadth, but whenever we slowed down before a stop the guards came along to shut the doors and fix the bars in place."[60]

Often, the convicts in transit were fed very little. In Ginzberg's rail car, they were given salted soup of boiled herring tails, and one small mug of water to drink for the day, so they all nearly went out of their minds with thirst.[61] Janusz Bardach writes of his train journey to Kolyma: "After ten days, everyone and everything was filthy. We only got water to drink twice a day, and all had to drink from a single cup chained to the wall. With no water for washing and no toilet paper, everything we touched caused diarrhea."[62] Soon, people on the train began to die. "The guards removed the corpses in the mornings with the same disinterest and detachment they showed when delivering our rations."[63]

When Mochulsky arrived at Pechorlag, the convicts built him a cozy dugout, which he describes in detail. But barracks life in the camps was very different. The American Gulag survivor John Noble was a prisoner in

a Vorkuta coal-mining camp. His bunk was a segment of a two-foot width of long, hard, wooden shelf with no sheets, mattress, pillow, or blanket.

> When the next prisoner lay down, a big Russian peasant who smelled of *makhorka*, their crude tobacco made from the stem of the plant, our shoulders were touching. Later, when new men came in, I had only enough room to sleep on my side flat against the next man....It was a human jungle, smelly, overcrowded. Everyone, including the guards, spat large globs openly on the floor....There was no toilet in the barracks, just an outhouse 150 yards away.[64]

Mochulsky, as a boss of several units of prisoners, focuses on how he and his prisoner-laborers worked to fulfill the government's demands that were enumerated in the Five-Year Plan. He only infrequently mentions that his convict labor force was so sick and ill-fed that often the plan could not be fulfilled. Vladimir Petrov, speaking about gold mining in Kolyma, gives a typical prisoner's perspective on GULAG work: "Even in the early weeks of the brief Kolyma summer, the men revealed a tendency to die at a rate never before known in the region....A man pushing a wheelbarrow up the high runway to the panning apparatus would suddenly halt, sway for a moment, and fall down from a height of twenty-four to thirty feet. And that was the end."[65]

Sometimes there were prisoners who refused to work, or who angered the guards. In Mochulsky's camp, he recounts bargaining and giving them extra incentives to get them out on the job. Although Mochulsky mentions the "punishment cell," called the Isolator, only once, this was actually a common tool in the Gulag (as was the more direct form of oppression—murder). Many prisoner memoirs recall it with horror. A stint in the Isolator could fundamentally harm one's health or lead to death. The Isolator normally consisted of four walls without a roof, and thus was completely exposed to the elements even in extreme temperatures. Sometimes, there would be a hole in the ground where the prisoner stood. Solzhenitsyn tells how one Arnold Rappoport stayed in a hole like that at the Vorkuta-Vom camp in 1937, with rags pulled over his head to shelter himself from the rain and snow.

> Here is how they were fed: The jailer came out of the gatehouse hut with the bread rations and called to the men inside the log frame: "Come out and get your rations!" but no sooner did they stick their heads out of the log frame then the guard on the watchtower aimed his rifle: "Stop, I'll shoot!" And the jailer acted astonished. "What, you don't want your bread? Well, then, I'll leave." And he simply hurled the bread and fish down into the pit in the rain-soaked clay.[66]

Mochulsky and many other Gulag memoirists mention the strict division between the political prisoners (the 58ers) and the common criminals. In Mochulsky's camp they appear to inhabit different barracks. Since the Soviet government held that the nonpoliticals were reformable through indoctrination and reeducation, and the politicals were more socially dangerous, the criminal elements were deemed more trustworthy than the other convicts. Often the camp administrators employed the criminal prisoners (called *urkas*, or thieves) to help control the other prisoners. As Solzhenitsyn notes, "The thieves were egged on against the 58ers, permitted to plunder them without any obstacles, to beat, to choke....The thieves became just like an internal camp police, camp storm troopers."[67]

John Noble had eight criminal prisoners in his barracks, sharing an area that would otherwise hold more than twenty prisoners. According to Noble, the criminals spent their time stealing, sleeping, sharpening the knives they made, playing homemade balalaikas, and dancing. No boss in the camp would dare ask them to go out and work. "If one of them should as much as lift a shovel, he would be murdered instantly by his comrades."[68]

Noble and Mochulsky both describe the hardened criminals betting on some other prisoner's life in their card games. The loser had to execute the person the others chose. Noble witnessed this scene in his barracks.

> A young blond-haired *blatnoi* (criminal) about 18, the loser, pulled a knife out of his belt and calmly approached the lower shelf of bunks about halfway between me and the place where they had been playing cards. He had a padded jacket in one hand and the knife in the other. Sleeping on the shelf was a well-fed prisoner, one of the cooks in the mess hall. The *blatnoi* walked silently, without causing a creak in the old flooring, then leaped at the cook. In one swift professional movement he threw the *bushlat* (quilted jacket) over the cook's head, held him down with a viselike grip around the neck, then jabbed the long blade to the hilt some

twelve times in the victim's chest and stomach. The cook screeched through the *bushlat*. Dripping blood from his chest, he pushed the *blatnoi* off him. He got off the shelf and started to run down the barracks aisle toward the door. He got about fifteen feet then collapsed and died in a pool of his own blood.[69]

Hunger plagued everyone in the camps, and Mochulsky writes about how he struggled to feed the staff and prisoners by trapping birds for them. Later he leaves the camp to buy himself a reindeer to live on. What he does not write about is the number of prisoners who slowly and painfully starved to death, or who contracted diseases that killed them. In Lev Kopelev's camp, everyone suffered from pellagra, a disease caused by a lack of Vitamin B3. Its symptoms are diarrhea, dermatitis, dementia, and death. "Sometimes," Kopelev wrote, "in addition to the usual gruel for dinner, we were given rations of coagulated blood, said to be very good for pellagra. Many of us refused to touch it, hungry as we were; it stank too much of carrion. So a lot of it was left over."[70]

Nadezhda Surovtseva writes about an outbreak of typhoid in her camp.

> Every night we would hear the male prisoners howling "Water . . . ," yet apart from occasionally firing warning shots from the watchtowers, the camp authorities did nothing. The prisoners were also starving. Later, throughout July and August, when the epidemic was at its height but was still not acknowledged, prisoners would conceal the death of a neighbor on their bunk and lie beside the decomposing body so as to continue receiving the few extra grams of the dead man's bread ration. The guards, growing suspicious that a prisoner had not gotten up for a long time, would twitch his leg, and their hand would sink into a soft porridge of flesh. Prisoners were not treated but only carted away to the morgue.[71]

Dmitri Panin describes how his camp, Viatlag, in northern Russia, turned into a "house of death."

> Men in the prime of life were stretched out half-frozen and totally exhausted on their bunks, capable only of scratching flea bites and fighting off bedbugs. By the spring of 1942, the death rate in this camp of a thousand men had climbed to a rate of eighteen a day. Thousands of excellent men had gone to their graves. I will never forget how they were carried out of the barbed-wire zone in specially-made made crates with lids, and how at the sentry post a bayonet was run through their heads—just to make sure that none of them was merely feigning death with the intention of trying to escape once they were outside.[72]

Starving to death was such a common occurrence that the other prisoners called the starving inmates "goners." Evgeniia Ginzberg describes one female doctor, who before prison had been married to a former chairman of the RSFSR Council of People's Commissars. Now she was just a "goner."

> She was never parted from her quilted jacket, which had become stiff as a board with dirt; she hid away from the communal bath routine; and she went around the canteen carrying a bucket into which she slopped all the dregs of the soup from other people's bowls. Then she sat down on the step and greedily gobbled up the slop straight from the bucket, like a sea gull.[73]

When Mochulsky first arrives at Pechorlag, he mentions seeing carpenters building coffins for the many dead prisoners. Varlam Shalamov's character describes a mass grave he saw while working on a gang opening up a new road to a mountain. "A grave, a mass prisoner grave, a stone pit stuffed full with undecaying corpses from 1938 was sliding down the side of the hill, revealing the secret of Kolyma."[74]

He continues:

> The permafrost keeps and reveals secrets. All of our loved ones who died in Kolyma, all those who were shot, beaten to death, sucked dry by starvation, can still be recognized even after tens of years. There were no gas ovens in Kolyma. The corpses wait in stone, in the permafrost. . . . The earth opened, baring its subterranean storerooms, for they contained not only gold and lead, tungsten and uranium, but also undecaying human bodies. These human bodies slid down the slope, perhaps attempting to arise.[75]

Then, as the prisoners stood watching, "The bulldozer scraped up the frozen bodies, thousands of bodies of thousands of skeleton-like corpses. Nothing had decayed: the twisted fingers, the pus-filled toes which were reduced to mere stumps after frostbite, the dry skin scratched bloody and the eyes burning with a hungry gleam."[76]

Why was this evil perpetrated? Why the Gulag? Was it for economic, political, or ideological reasons? There has been no definitive answer to this question. At a 2006 conference at Harvard University, several scholars put forth various possible explanations.[77] Some feel that the Gulag existed for economic reasons, that is, to provide free labor. It was much easier to send prisoners to the least inhabitable parts of the USSR than to entice free laborers. In this way, the Soviets could fully exploit the underground riches of the country. And once held in these remote areas, the prisoners could be kept indefinitely in exile, thus helping to colonize remote, inhospitable regions like Komi, where Mochulsky's camp was located. Others feel that the purpose of the Gulag was political. The use of terror intimidated people from opposing the regime, or simply isolated any potential "enemies to Soviet power." The Gulag could also weaken those parts of society that previously were large and powerful as a block (such as the farmers before collectivization, the church, entire ethnic groups). Still others feel that the reeducation component of the Gulag was important; that convicts, by doing time at a forced labor camp, could be "reforged," that is, shaped into genuine Soviet citizens.

The Gulag as it existed in the Soviet Union from 1917 to 1953 was an unimaginable place, a world inside a world, with its own rules, rulers, and ruled. It involved millions of people, including staff and prisoners. The Gulag was one of those quintessentially Soviet institutions that bound together victims and perpetrators, bureaucrats and ordinary workers, the Communist Party and the NKVD, foreigners and Soviet citizens. Mochulsky's memoir of his jobs as a camp boss in the Gulag forces us to recognize that a large number of Soviet citizens worked in this horrendous institution.

More than a million Soviet citizens staffed the Gulag during its existence.[78] No matter what kind of job a Gulag staffer had, and no matter how hard an NKVD employee worked to fulfill the plan, we cannot forget that these Soviet citizens formed a solid column of support for the crimes committed in the name of "building socialism" in the USSR. Their jobs depended on the existence of an institution that arrested people on bogus charges, then starved, mistreated, exploited, manipulated, worked to death, and ruined them.

Presumably, many Gulag staffers went on to have different jobs, to have families and to carry on with the "building of socialism." Mochulsky later became a diplomat and had a very prominent international career

in the most prestigious and comfortable wing of the bureaucracy. He was an elite member of the system. He remained a Communist Party member his entire life. And yet, as a thinking person, he carried an uneasiness about the great disjunction between theory and reality. Like millions of Soviets, he somehow had to square his belief in the dream of building communism with the reality of maintaining an enormous system of slave labor.

This memoir allows us to examine the thoughts and actions of a man on the largely unknown side of this massive human tragedy. We should not forget that this is one person's memoir, with all the promise and dangers of the genre. But for now, we need to listen to Mochulsky. This is his story.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

I am hoping that this book will be widely read both inside and outside the formal academic world, and I have tried to balance scholarly depth with broad accessibility. I have used the Library of Congress transliteration system, with the exception of hard and soft sign indicators, to make the text easy to read (hence, the town of Abez' is written simply as Abez). Some already familiar names are spelled as is conventional, such as Gorky (and not Gorkii) or Mochulsky (as opposed to Mochulskii). In addition, although in Russian the word Gulag is an acronym and is generally written in all caps, in this book it generally appears as Gulag. The one exception is when the author refers to the actual organization, as in GULAG NKVD.

In the body of the memoir, the text as presented is largely the same as the original. Where required for flow of the narrative, I have moved some small sections. Occasionally, I have cut some redundant paragraphs. I have preserved Mochulsky's chapter structure and titles, but in a few cases I divided long chapters and named new ones myself.

All notes to the text are mine. Because this book is intended for a general readership, I have focused on English-language sources. There is a small Russian-language reading list at the back for specialists.

CHAPTER 9

TRANSFERRED TO THE 93RD UNIT

Labor Force: Hardened Criminals

EVERYTHING THAT HAPPENED, I LEARNED LATER. THE CHANGES that directly affected me at Pechorlag began with talk I heard over the Selektor. I was told to go to the 6th Department for a new job. Once there, I found out that I was to become part of the local camp leadership. The 6th Department leaders praised me for taking urgent measures to save prisoners' lives at the beginning of the winter. They emphasized that I had conducted myself as a true Communist. And finally, they told me that they "had in mind" to entrust me with a new sector of work, which was at the 93rd camp unit. There, they said, I would encounter some very interesting engineering problems. The new camp unit was located just south of the 6th Department, not far from the Camp Administration offices.

The rest of the discussion revolved around what they called the "front of work" that I would face, meaning the engineering problems, and not a word was said about what kind of workforce I would find at the 93rd camp unit. Because of my own naïveté, I did not even think to ask them. However, when I did find out what kind of prisoners were there, it became clear to me that the workforce would be my main obstacle.

The thing was, at that time, the majority of Pechorlag's physically sound, nonpolitical zeks were hardened criminals, gangsters, and other kinds of felons. Many of them had been in prison previously. These men had totally acclimated to prison life, and they even had their own rules and customs. For them, the Gulag was a "second home."

Later, I came to understand that the most hard-boiled group of hardened criminals and gangsters in the camps obeyed only their own rule, which was: "We do not work." Following this rule, the only thing these prisoners were allowed to do was to work "for themselves." In other words, they could fix food, prepare wood, light the stove, and clean shoes, but nothing else. In preserving their own existence, the criminals had subordinated some of the inexperienced, simple, and healthy prisoners, the "newbies," by using threats and intimidation. These new guys were forced to work "for two," that is, for themselves, and in order to defend themselves, for their "godfathers." The experienced bosses of the mobile units had not chosen these "godfathers" when they had picked out their workers. So when the selected prisoners left the 93rd camp unit for the ice roads, they left behind them the dregs of the criminal world.

The Camp Administration concealed all of this from me when they gave me my new assignment. I still believe that there was an ulterior motive behind this "new job." Most likely, the older camp cadres who had survived the recent purge had come up with this: "Akh, everyone bragged about how brave you had been in building those warm prisoner barracks earlier this winter. But now, you can show us that you are also talented enough to work with bands of hardened criminals and gangsters, the men that were even rejected by "their own." They were saying: "You think you are so smart and principled, so now we'll give you something nice and cozy to work with!"

When I met with the leadership of the 6th Department, they told me only that there would be around three hundred prisoners left once the mobile units had been formed. They also informed me that my new camp unit had no foreman and no boss, nor did it have any real administrative structure in place. In other words, I would have to select an entire new staff on site, and then start to work. Oh, and at the moment, I was told, all of the prisoners in the 93rd camp unit had refused to go to work.

With that, the leadership introduced me to a young man who showed up dressed in zek clothing. He was around thirty years old, had a clean-shaven head, and an open, affable, ready smile. (As I came to know him better, I found that he had a great sense of humor and loved to joke around. He was always more than willing to make fun of himself. This was his way of philosophically coming to terms with the lives we were living.) It turned out that this young prisoner had been assigned to the 93rd camp unit as the labor assistant to the unit boss. The labor assistant was a

category of worker in the camp for nonpolitical prisoners who were serving long sentences. These zeks were taught to work in the camps with the cadres, which meant that they worked assisting the bosses of the camp units, or the foremen. Their status allowed them to move about without armed guards within the boundaries of the department. They carried a special pass with their photograph on it.

In any case, we were told that we both needed to go to the assignments center immediately, without delay. The sleighs were already waiting. So, not understanding anything about what was what, and not having been shown even a blueprint of what we were expected to build, I was literally pushed into my new job.

We covered ourselves with hay in the sleigh. As we slid along the path, my new assistant told me about himself. Until he was sent to prison, he had been an NKVD employee, a security officer, in the city of Taganrog at a fish factory.[1] There he seduced the wife of his boss. The boss found out, and "slammed" his colleague off to the Gulag for ten years, supposedly for a barrel of rotten herring. (The official charge was "plundering socialist property.")

When I told him that I knew nothing about the type of prisoners that I was about to work with, he chided me for being gullible, and proceeded to tell me what sort of men I was facing. You can imagine how I felt when I finally understood what kind of a situation I had been caught in, all due to my naïveté and inexperience. My new colleague saw how hard I took this news. He tried to calm me down by persuading me that it was not that bad and that we would find a way to deal with it.

Later that evening we arrived at the 93rd camp unit. They sent us immediately to get some sleep. I was placed with the platoon security commander, and my colleague was dispatched to the camp unit's labor assistant.

Early the next morning, the labor assistant came to me and said, literally, the following words: "Well, Citizen Boss, permit me to report, that of the three hundred prisoners available, only ten people have lined up. And these ten have agreed only to stack wood, because there was no wood to heat the barracks."

I said I would be at the camp in a few minutes. The labor assistant and the platoon security commander both told me that going there would be useless. They said these were the type of prisoners who would not be talked into anything. All the same, I insisted, and we went.

In contrast to Pernashor, everything in this camp was depressing. There were no bushes, no spruce trees, and no paths. There were several large old barracks. The kitchen was outside the zone. We went into one

of the barracks. Inside, there were no berths, only wooden planks from wall to wall, on two levels. The prisoners were lying on the planks. At the far end of the barracks sat a sturdily built middle-aged prisoner with a wedge-shaped beard, repairing shoes. As he soled a felt boot, he watched us carefully, paying attention to us as we talked.

What normally happened when the boss walked into a barracks was that the barracks orderly would give the command "Stand!" And then he would report how many men were at work, how many were resting after their shift, and how many were sick. When we showed up that day, though, nobody stirred, and nobody announced anything. They did not even look at us, as if we were an empty space. When I said, "Hello," the barracks answered with silence.

Then I asked an elderly prisoner who was lying on a wooden plank, "Why aren't you at work?" In answer, I heard, "I have been sitting for twenty-five years in the Gulag, and I have never worked for anyone. And you think I'm going to work for you, you little snot-nose. Fuck...your mother!" All at once, the whole barracks broke into guffaws.

I walked right up to the plank bed, and looked him in the face. Some watched me with curiosity, others with hatred. Several people simply turned away. I noticed a strong, obviously peasant chap with reddish cheeks and, out of the blue I thought: Nothing will get him, not even the North. I bet his family was "dekulakized." I asked him why he was not at work. That young man cast his eyes off to the side, making an effort to imitate the hardened criminal.

We left the barracks and the labor assistant said: "We won't get anywhere until we find the leader."

The commanding officer and I agreed with him. The labor assistant took on the painstaking work of finding their leader. I won't say how he managed that. But after several days it became clear that the leader was that prisoner with the wedge-shaped, professorial beard who had been repairing shoes that day we had come into the barracks.

I asked to see this leader, and we spoke for a long time. I asked him where he was from, if he was married, if he had children, where they were, what his profession "on the outside" had been, how long he had been here at Pechorlag, and how many times he had been in prison, and so on. At first he was prickly and answered my questions curtly, in monosyllables. But after a while, I managed to get him to warm up to talking to me. He told me that this was his second time in prison. This second term he had gotten because when he had only two more years to go until he

could be released from his original term, he tried to escape. They caught him and gave him ten more years. He finished with these candid words: "Citizen Boss, don't even try. No matter what, we will not work."

Based on some advice I had received from the labor assistant, I told him the following: "Well, okay, but put yourself in my place. I am a young specialist, and I have no experience. But one thing I do know is that this prison camp, Pechorlag, has been given military status now. The war with Germany could break out at any minute. The first thing the Nazis will do is take the Donbas Coal Basin, so it will be out of service. Then all of our military factories will be forced to stop producing weapons and equipment to fight the war. The plan is for the Soviet government to get access to the coal in Vorkuta. I know that you prisoners have your own ways. But my task is to build a section of rail line to the coal at Vorkuta as quickly as possible."

I continued speaking: "If you refuse to get out there and help build these railway tracks, then I will have no choice but to send you personally and your friends to the Punishment Unit.[2] If you agree to work with me, then you may form your own brigade and organize it however you see fit; I will not interfere. I will have nothing to do with who is in it and who is not. I have made an agreement with the camp security men that your brigade will be brought back from the tracks to camp as soon as you fulfill your norm, even if the twelve-hour shift has not ended. Also, I will give your brigade the right to send your own representative to the kitchen to make sure that the cooks set aside any extra food that the brigade has earned for its cauldron. If your brigade fulfills the plan by 150 percent in any given twenty-four-hour period, then bonus meat dishes will be added to the dinner of each member of the brigade. And, if you think the brigade would like it, I could get your brigade all housed together in one barrack. I will help."

I told him that I would not wait very long for his answer. I told him to think about it and talk it over with the others. So, tomorrow, I told him, one of two things would happen. Either he would give me a list of men who would form a brigade, which would line up for work at 6:00 AM, or he and his men would be sent under reinforced convoy immediately to the Punishment Unit. I expressed the hope that he understood me correctly.

The labor assistant, the commanding officer, and I waited impatiently until the next morning. On that morning, we received a list of men for the brigade. Their brigade was made up of habitual recidivists, solidly

built young men who had landed there during dekulakization, strong prisoners from Central Asia who spoke almost no Russian, and a number of other men whom the recidivists were clearly using as "dairy cows." In return, the recidivists protected the "dairy cows" from the pervasive mockery and brutality in the zone. It was always a mystery to me how the remaining recidivists who were not selected by their pals for the ice-road brigades were able to keep such strong, hardy prisoners (whom they exploited) for themselves.

By an agreement I had made with the security platoon, a separate security convoy accompanied this brigade to the work site. Their job was to dig into the frozen, clayish soil and widen the area that had already been dug out for the future railway line. They left for the tracks at 6:00 AM. At 7:00 AM, I walked past their work site. They all were sitting around a campfire. It was the same situation when I checked at 8:00 AM and at 9:00 AM. Then brigade leader then said to me: "Citizen Boss, let's have a smoke." I sat down and started a general conversation. He studied my face. I acted as if I had no doubts about what we had agreed on, and that the work would be done. I just sat with him smoking a cigar. Then I got up to go.

Suddenly the brigade leader stuck four fingers into his mouth, made a piercing whistle, and gave the command: "Well, gang, let's go!" Everyone, except a few men of the criminal elite[3] who remained sitting at the campfire, jumped up and began working at a good clip. At 2:00 in the afternoon, I heard a shout from down the tracks: "Foreman!" I went. The brigade leader said: "Check the work."

They had completed 150 percent of their norm. The men in the brigade put their pickaxes, crowbars, and shovels onto their shoulders and with a song full of curses, walked with their security guard past the other prisoner-workers, back to the zone. There, already waiting for them, was a substantial dinner. On this day, in addition to this very brigade, the remaining men also began to work. In a few days, the ringleader requested that his entire brigade be resettled into one barrack.

So about two weeks after my arrival at the 93rd camp unit, we started having normal workdays. It seemed that all was going well and I could be happy.