

7. The Prison Camp

Prison Camp Director Yakov Markovitch Schwartz, a man in his mid-forties with the eyes of a Jewish intellectual and the speech of a well-educated Russian, was sorry to say that it didn't look as though the school idea would come off after all. "But you *are* evacuees," he said, "you need work and we need a normirovchik. Know what that is?"

I had never in my life heard the word.

He explained: "The prisoners' daily output has to be checked and recorded. Every job must be computed according to the norm, and that's done with a logarithmic slide rule. You *can* use a slide rule, can't you?"

"I'm afraid I've never seen one," I had to admit.

"Oh, well you could use an abacus, I guess." – he was doing his best to help.

Unfortunately I had to disappoint him. In Russia they use an abacus in every office, store and bank, but I had never tried it. I shook my head.

"So what am I going to do with you?" the Prison Camp Director threw up his hands.

"How much time would I have for training?" I ventured.

"A month," he says.

"Three weeks will do," I told him. "If I don't pick it up in three weeks, I'll quit."

"Fair enough," he said, "but I must warn you: if you don't have anywhere to stay, you won't be able to work here."

I told him about Valya's offer to let Hana Bluma and me stay in her room. "She's not an easy person, you know," he advised me, "what if you don't get along?"

"I've no choice, I'll manage."

I began work. Within three weeks I knew all the norms by heart and could do whatever computations they wanted.

My job started in the evening when the prisoners returned from work and what we didn't finish at night the others completed during the day. Our office manager, Anya Herbensky, came from Leningrad. Her husband was top brass in the army and she received his army pay in addition to her own wages; she'd brought her whole wardrobe with her from home, and every day showed up in a smart tailored suit and a crisply ironed blouse. She trained me into the job a little, but our relations remained stiff and formal and she clearly avoided conversation. There was another Anya from Leningrad there too. We were all called Anya and all three Jewish.

This other Anya and I became bosom friends, and it was she who really taught me my job. What a life this girl had! The only garment she had to wear was an old thin dress, practically in holes, that she wore all the time. Like the others her husband was at the front, and she had two children and old sick parents to fend for. She had to work seven days a week and therefore never had time to travel around trying to get a bit of extra food, and her children and parents were at home starving. I lived in the *lagpunkt* whereas Anya lived in a village about six kilometers away and had to set out for work every day well before daybreak. She ate no food at the canteen but was allowed to take home the equivalent in food products. With the rations for one person she fed a whole family. Anya could only work during the day. Night-workers were paid a higher rate, but in the evening she had to stay home to care for her parents and children. One day her hungry father went to dig up rotten potatoes left in the field after the harvest; they made him so ill he had to be hospitalized. She was loaned a horse and buggy, which fortunately I could handle, and together we

brought her father to the hospital. We took him back and forth a few times till in the end he died there.

The prison camp was situated in the Vyatka¹³ forest, an immense forest covering hundreds of square kilometers. Work stations set up in forest clearings were up to fifty kilometers apart and the prisoners, men and women, moved from station to station. Our computations relied on data given by the brigadier (work-brigade foreman) on his daily work-sheet. For a prisoner to earn a kilo of bread – the minimum they all strove for – each brigadier had to prove his brigade had achieved maximum output. Anyone who didn't exceed the bare norm received only 600 gr. of bread – nowhere near enough to keep one alive in that climate. So the first thing I had to learn was the technique of filling out the work sheet the right way, and convey this somehow to the brigadier. "It's no good them just writing down the number of trees they felled," explained Anya. "That would leave them without any extra bread. The brigadier must specify: a) the number of trees felled, b) how many branches they cut off the trees, c) the distance the branches were transported by vehicle/dragged by hand, d) that fire was fetched and twigs burned, e) the amount of timber sawn into logs, f) the number of logs sorted into different sizes and stacked in piles." They also had to know how to pile them with spaces in-between to use less logs per cubic meter.

I could not spell this out in words – my employers were the prison authorities who preferred to dole out less bread rather than more. Being a "free civilian" I was forbidden to talk to the prisoners except in an official manner: "Give," "Sign," "Take," etc. Getting into conversation with them was a punishable offence. At the same time, Anya warned me, if the prisoners suspected me of cheating them of their due – some were real criminals, remember – they could come in the night and slit my throat.

One brigadier I did happen to exchange a few words with, a "fifty-eightier"¹⁴ was a Byelorussian agronomist, a highly educated man and an intellectual. He had been imprisoned for telling a joke. To his wife. One day at work he had heard a very good anti-Soviet joke. He came home and just *had* to tell it to his spouse. He took her in the kitchen alone, told her the joke and they both had a very good laugh. Evidently one of the neighbors had had his or her ear to the kitchen door. Before long the police arrived and arrested them. Article 58 had several clauses. Clause 10, for instance was about talking, i.e. the offence of talking against the government. Penalties for being found guilty under any of the clauses of Article 58 began at ten years and went up to twenty-five. For telling that joke, the agronomist had been given a ten-year sentence.

Anyone unfit for forest work stayed behind to clean the compound. As time went on these inmates became more and more debilitated – some had been there twenty-five years. How long can a person live on three hundred grams of bread a day? Prisoners who received help from outside, those with families who managed to send them food, could somehow keep going. Many inmates had no one, and even if they had living relatives – who knew where they were? Such prisoners could not hope to survive.

We "free civilians" were assigned to kitchen duties once a month and we were very glad to do it, because when you worked in the kitchen you got a free plate of food. For the prisoners they took horses guts or any animal guts, washed them a bit, and that was the meat; this they boiled with potatoes and all kinds of rubbish to make soup. The prisoners were ready to kill over a spoonful of this soup. Those at the front of the queue were served from the top of the pot, black water; the last in line got from the bottom of the pot, a little barley, a bit of potato. Famished, after working from early morning in the forest, they all

scrambled to be first in line. If they were smart enough they managed to get in front, eat the soup then join the line again without being recognized by the guard. When the pots were cleaned and the dregs thrown outside – where they immediately froze – the inmates would already be crowding round the door waiting to lick the frozen slop. I usually worked nights, and in the morning the civilian kitchen staff would arrive and announce matter-of-factly: “Another six flies today,” or “Another eight flies today,” or “Only three flies today?” The “flies” were the prisoners who died of cold and starvation on the slop pile.

One of the prisoners I met at the camp was a Bessarabian Jew named Hottman who had been a grain merchant. He told me he had buried a diamond ring somewhere in the camp but he couldn’t risk digging it up for fear of being killed for it. He didn’t know what to do and asked if I would dig it up and take it. I said, “What would I do with it? I wouldn’t know where to put it either.” “Take the ring, have it,” he begged. “Just bring me some bread.” How could I bring him bread? – I couldn’t get any for myself.

In the camp I saw for the first time a love affair between two women. The authorities who knew about it decided to separate the lovers and send one of them away. The prisoner left behind slit her stomach. I heard she was a recidivist – back in prison for the third time. She’d serve her time and be released; they’d say “Goodbye” and she’d say, “Au revoir – I’ll be back.” She wasn’t capable of being anything but a thief. If she passed a washing line and there happened to be a dress hanging there that she fancied, she’d decide: “That’s just for me! What – not take it?” She said: “Prison is home, I don’t have any other.” But when they took her girlfriend, she stuck a knife in her belly. She was taken off somewhere – there was no doctor and no sick-bay at the prison camp. We didn’t see her again.

Many babies were born at the prison camp. Pregnant women and nursing mothers were given jobs in the compound and didn’t have to go to the forest, so each baby guaranteed its mother an “easy life” of about one and a half years. This was one of the reasons why many women wanted to get pregnant. But also, people naturally look for a little love, a little animal warmth; you’d do almost anything to get that. Where did the lovers meet? In some latrine, some cold filthy dump, wherever they could. One of the guards’ great delights was to hunt out lovers. A couple found together would be punished and one of them would immediately be sent away to another camp.

My job brought me into contact with other people, prisoners working in our unit. One of them, Rosa, must once have been a raving beauty; she had blue eyes and strawberry blonde hair and her cheeks still had a tinge of pink. There was a soft glow about her and I called her Rose Pink. She confided in me that she was Jewish. She had been married to a Georgian who had been given 25 years as a “traitor.” She herself had neither been accused of anything nor tried but had been deported as a traitor’s wife, thus no separate file on her existed – only a file on her husband. Nowhere was it stated how long she would have to be at the camp, but she had reckoned on serving as long as her husband. He, however, had been sent to a different camp, she knew not where, nor did her husband know where *she* was. But after a time she received news from her family that her Georgian husband, who evidently had connections, had been re-tried and released after serving five years. And she was left here, ignored and forgotten, at our camp. Without a file there was no way she could be released. She said: “Here’s where I’ll die.”

Rose Pink had a boyfriend in the camp, a Russian, accused of murder. Apart from being dashing handsome, he was the sanest-looking individual I ever met

and by no stretch of the imagination can I believe, to this day, that he was capable of murder. He worshipped the ground Rose Pink walked on. I gave her the percentages to work from and she registered the amount of bread due to each prisoner so I got to exchange a few words with her – but I never asked about her boyfriend. Working next to her was another girl doing a similar job. I had the feeling that I'd seen this other girl before, and that she recognized me. I asked her name and she told me: "Vera Shkotalski." The surname was quite a common Jewish name in Latvia, and in Varklyan we had a family of that name too. "I'm Russian, from Moscow," she told me. I hadn't asked her nationality.

I said, "Sorry, but the Shkotalskis I knew – and there were quite a few of them – were Jewish." All three of us sitting there were Jewish, so I wasn't afraid to talk. "As a matter of fact the chairman of my cell in Riga was called Baruch Shkotalski; he came from Dvinsk and he's now at the front." She didn't react but a kind of shadow flickered across her face. She was olive-skinned and a blush wouldn't have shown. I was convinced that she was Jewish – but that was something people didn't like to admit. I'd heard she had a baby daughter; it was thanks to the baby she had been given office work.

In the two years since leaving Riga I had never stopped searching, writing to every Latvian organization, to any friend of a friend of a friend whose address I found, trying to trace someone in my family, trying to find out about my parents. So far I had had no news at all but a girl I corresponded with worked in the Latvian expatriate government offices. One day a letter arrived from her telling me that Baruch Shkotalski had been killed at the front.

I came to the office pale and shaky, hardly able to do my work; they asked me what was the matter: "I heard such terrible news today, I can't get over it," I told them, "This boy who was chairman of my cell in Riga, Baruch Shkotalski, was killed at the front."

Vera fell off her chair in a faint.

When she recovered she admitted the truth – that she wasn't from Moscow, but from Dvinsk, and that Baruch was her brother. They were a Communist family and she herself had spent several years in jail in Latvia under the Fascist regime. Since it was feared she may be tried again the Party had sent her over the border to Moscow; there, she was accused by the Soviets of being a traitor and sentenced to twenty-five years in prison – which she was still serving. She said: "I came in as a young girl, and when I got that sentence I knew that by the time I left – if I ever leave – I'd be an old woman. I wanted to have someone, someone of my own. I found a man and got pregnant, and now I have a daughter." Not long after she gave birth, she said, a guard had discovered her and her boyfriend together; they were separated and she had been sent to this prison. "I'll never see him again, he'll have found someone else by now," she said. "Now I just have his child. Is this a life for a child?"

My heart went out to her. I wrote back to my friend at the Latvian office and told her the story, and a few weeks later I received a reply from her telling me she had located Vera's sister who happened to be working in the Communist Central Committee in Moscow. Thanks to my friend's initiative, the sister learned about Vera and applied for permission to take Vera's child, her niece, out of the camp. Until my friend at the Latvian office and I made this connection, all this sister knew was that Vera had left, disappeared, and that was the end of it – the family would never find her. And indeed, after the war when the Latvian expatriate offices closed down, the family's chances of finding Vera would have been nil. Whilst I was still at the camp the sister came to take the little girl back with her to Moscow. At least the child would be free. Years later I learned that

the Soviet Ministry of Justice had responded to the sister's application for a retrial and Vera Shkotalski was acquitted and released. She was reunited with her daughter and they went to live in Riga. She had been lucky: by sheer chance she and I met and I made the connection that saved her.

Among the fifty-eighters working with me was a Polish woman named Bronislava Bronislavovna and she too had a child, also born at the camp. She had been employed as a pianist at a club where they held dances and socials. One night the MVD walked into the club and arrested the committee for holding nationalistic and anti-Soviet activities. Bronislava, who played the piano there, was arrested too. She had nothing to do with the club's activities, she told me, she just came, played the piano and got paid. But she was given a prison sentence like the rest of them. While still in jail her husband divorced her and sent her the divorce papers; their son stayed with his father, more than that she didn't know. It was this need to have and hold someone that motivated her to have her baby.

There were many such hopeless cases who had no prospects of ever coming out of there. Like the poor old man who was said to have once been a supporter of the Kamenev or Zinovyev¹⁵ factions. At the camp he was known as the *dokhadiaga* – i.e. an old dodderer nearing the end. His eyes watered and his nose dripped, he was withered and bent and walked with a limp – what a pathetic creature! I believe he'd been there over twenty years. A whole life gone! He wouldn't talk. If I started saying something to him he'd shut me up: "Shhh. You're still young and free, child. You take care."

Another elderly fifty-eighter, called Reuven like my father, had been editor of "Emess," the Yiddish paper published in Birobidjan and spoke wonderful Yiddish. The prison camp was surrounded by barbed wire outside which was a high wooden fence. Unlike the prisoners who went to work in the forest always accompanied by guards, prisoners working within the lag punkt, were not guarded at work and Reuven was allowed to walk around there freely. One day he knocked at our door; I came out and he gave me a couple of cucumbers he'd evidently filched from the kitchen garden. I guess he felt I needed a spot of fatherly advice: "You be careful, *maidle*, don't talk to me," he said. "Don't ask me anything and don't talk to others. Watch out for yourself." He was hoping to be released, he said. That meant he may be released from prison but would not be leaving the area. Usually when people were released, they continued living near the camp or in the administrative compound but were forbidden to go back to their hometown or live in any city.

The majority of Jews at the prison camp were fifty-eighters, but there were also some non-political Jewish prisoners too. One of them, a young, well-educated and good-looking Siberian Jew named Caplan, had been sentenced to seven years for being involved in "private enterprise." He had left a young wife at home. "The only Jewish thing about me is my name," he told me. He knew almost nothing about Judaism. He so abhorred being in prison that he wrote to the authorities asking to be allowed to serve at the front. One day he came and asked if I could possibly get him some vodka; his request for conscription had been granted and he was going with the army to the fighting front. If I brought him vodka, he said, he would give me his shirt – he wore one of those Russian shirts with a side fastening, a hand embroidered pure linen "kosovrotka". How I obtained the vodka I don't recall, but I managed to bring him a hundred grams and he gave me his shirt. He went off to fight and I never heard any more about him.

Another man, Olshinsky, blonde and blue-eyed but clearly Jewish, was a prisoner when I started working but was then released and came to work in the administration. He was living with a Russian woman – a civilian – and I was green with envy at the pretty dresses she always wore, a different dress almost every day. But I was so innocent and so ignorant of the kind of wheeling and dealing that went on in Soviet Russia. Once I asked prison director Markovitch if he'd mind explaining what was going on among the staff. I said "I'm working just like this Russian woman, and we earn the same. How is it I can't afford anything, I'm lucky if I can pay for the canteen and the bread, and she has beautiful clothes and shoes and is short of nothing?." He looked at me in amazement and asked how long I'd lived in the USSR. "From a year before the war, and this is my second year since," I said. "You'll learn," he said. "In time."

The building we lived in, about seventy square meters in area, accommodated four families. It had four rooms – two large, two small – and a kitchen. You entered through the kitchen where there was a wood-burning stove, which backed onto a wall the other side of which was a room where a guard lived with his wife and three or four children. Then came our tiny room in which Hana Bluma and I, Valya and little Genadi lived and directly off that was an even tinier room where a young woman lived with a baby and a baby-sitter. In a slightly larger room at the far end lived another guard with his wife and a few children. The conveniences – if you could call them that – were outside.

Hana Bluma minded Genadi, dressed him, washed him, fed him – the food Valya brought home from the creche – and took him for walks. It was not unusual for Valya to appear at odd times of the day with a gentleman friend, and at such times Hana Bluma would be asked to take Genadi for a stroll to the kitchen garden. Valya offered to introduce me to some nice men who she said would be interested to meet me and my "sister". Why not have a bit of fun, she said, not to mention all the other goodies. She couldn't understand how I always fobbed her off with some excuse. But Valya, despite the prison director's misgivings, turned out to be a real good sort and we got along very well. My wardrobe and Hana Bluma's consisted of the clothes we had left Riga with in June 1941. Came the day when we found our patched undershirts beyond repair; we had nothing to wear under our dresses. We told Valya about this and the next day she walked in with two crib-size sheets as material for new undershirts. She had taken old sheets from home, and told the supplies depot they were from the crêche and needed replacing. Hana Bluma and I sat a few evenings sewing undershirts for ourselves; the material was coarse un-dyed cotton, very rough on the skin, but we wore them.

The staff were informed we were going to be recruited to work on the lagpunkt kitchen garden in summer; could anyone handle a horse? I volunteered, and was given responsibility for fetching irrigation water. Not long after, I was informed that in spring I'd be getting an allotment of my own to cultivate.

About once in two months we received a sugar ration. In Russia you talk of a "head" of sugar – a large round lump – and our ration as civilian workers was a hundred and fifty to two hundred grams. I didn't even taste it – we drank our tea without sugar – but took it from village to village till I managed to exchange it for a bowl of potatoes; whichever direction you went within a radius of five to eight kilometers all the bowls were identical, so there was no way to get a better deal. We never ate those potatoes, I put them by for the spring.

I was provided with a spade, and Hana Bluma and I dug my plot and planted the potatoes, in quarters. It was very hard work, but we were rewarded with a

splendid crop. Every morning that summer I'd go over to the stable, take the horse and cart and a huge churn and go down to the river. I'd leave the wagon on the riverbank and climb down with a pail, haul the pail up full of water, raise it above my head and pour the water into the churn on the cart; it took forty pails to fill the churn. By noon I had fetched forty churns of water from the river. After this I'd go to the canteen and from there to the office to work until eight or eight-thirty at night. Then back I went to my allotment to water my potatoes and do some weeding and hoeing.

From 1942 I had been writing constantly to the missing relatives information center at Bogurusslan. All they came up with was Waldis's address. I wrote to him and a few weeks later received a cold formal reply, as though we had been nothing more than distant acquaintances. He told me he was being transferred, and not to write to him any more. That was the end of it. In the envelope he also enclosed some more old pictures of us together. I showed them around at work saying they were snapshots of my husband and me. Why? First, it was embarrassing still to be single; most women of my age – 23 – already had a few children. Second, I wanted to have my own man at the front like the other women, as though I too was doing my bit for the war. I'd passed my cousin off as my sister and said I was Latvian, not Jewish, so now one more lie – that I was married. I started writing to the Missing Relatives Bureau in Hana Bluma's name too, Platovski, and lo and behold a family of that name was located in a place called Obkhod. I wrote to the address, asking for more details about the family. A few weeks later a note arrived addressed to me: "Write Yaacov Fried". It was the first sign of life from anyone in the family after a search of more than two years! Those few words, however, written in childish hand-writing, brought back my nightmare. Had my parents been alive, father would have penned me a proper letter, for he was the only one among his brothers who could write.

I quickly wrote back with all kinds of questions: Are you from Varklyan? Are you called this and this? If so, you're my relatives. The reply, obviously written for uncle Yankel by a child, was affirmative. It really was them, and they were at this Obkhod place, somewhere between Kirov and Gorki. There were other aunts, uncles and cousins there too: Aunt Eidel, Hana Bluma's mother, with Hana Bluma's four brothers, and aunt Rochel and her husband and children. Together they had fled from Varaklyan on a horse-drawn cart piled high with whatever they managed to take. On the crowded road, however, there had been a collision, and Shleime the cobbler, Hana Bluma's father, had fallen off and been badly injured. They had taken him to a hospital there and traveled on without him. Uncle Yankel said in the letter that Hana Bluma should come and live with her mother and brothers and that I must come and join his family and live with them.

Curiously, Hana Bluma's reaction to this sign of life from her family and the new information, was less than lukewarm. Especially the idea of going to live with her mother. "Why go there?" she said. "We're better off here." She was right. Our situation had improved immensely: we had our new potatoes, and for my work on the kitchen garden I was due to be paid in kind, in the fall. The family over there could not be having it easy: uncle Yankel and aunt Yaha had two young teenage children with them, Raya and Benny, and also living with them, as the letter said, was another niece of aunt Yaha's, Rhoda, an only child who had lost both parents in the war.

I wrote back saying I needed to think about it. "There'll be another mouth to feed if I come," I said. "Are you sure you want me? Because over here we're not starving, we can keep going; the hardest time for me is over. Perhaps we should,

after all, remain here?" A reply came back immediately, this time from aunt Yaha: "We are the only ones left. You must come too and be here with us. Come!"

I sold the rest of the potatoes, waited for autumn and, in return for my work on the kitchen garden, received sacks and sacks of cabbages, carrots and onions. I sold everything and with the proceeds bought train tickets for both of us, with a fair amount of cash left over.

We left the prison camp and set out for our next stop. Obkhod.