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THE LONG WALK

The True Story of a Trek to Freedom

SLAVOMIR RAWICZ

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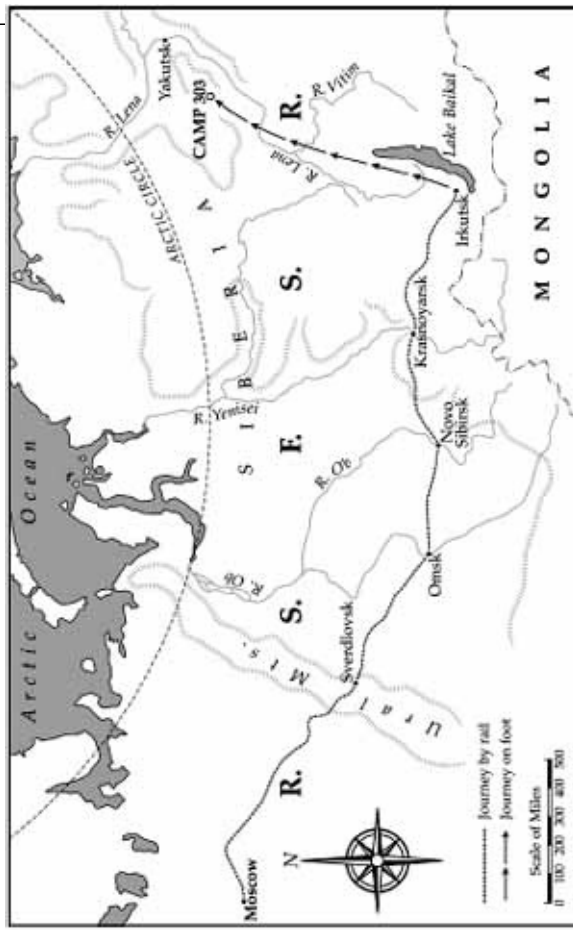
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Slavomir Rawicz acknowledges his debt to Ronald Downing who helped him write the book.

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Kharkov and the Lubyanka

IT WAS about nine o'clock one bleak November day that the key rattled in the heavy lock of my cell in the Lubyanka Prison and the two broad-shouldered guards marched purposefully in. I had been walking slowly round, left hand in the now characteristic prisoner's attitude of supporting the top of the issue trousers, which Russian ingenuity supplied without buttons or even string on the quite reasonable assumption that a man preoccupied with keeping up his pants would be severely handicapped in attempting to escape. I had stopped pacing at the sound of the door opening and was standing against the far wall as they came in. One stood near the door, the other took two or three strides in. 'Come,' he said. 'Get moving.'

For me this day – twelve months after my arrest in Pinsk on 19 November 1939 – was to be important. I was being marched off to my trial before the Soviet Supreme Court. Here in Moscow, shambling through the echoing narrow corridors of the Lubyanka between my two guards, I was a man almost shorn of identity, ill-fed, abysmally lonely, trying to keep alive some spark of resistance in the dank prison atmosphere of studied official loathing and suspicion of me. Just a year before, when the Russian security men walked into the welcome-home party my mother had arranged for me in the family house at Pinsk, I was Lieutenant Rawicz of the Polish Cavalry, aged 24, slim and smart in my well-tailored uniform and whipcord breeches and shining riding-boots. My condition now was a tribute to the unflagging brutalities and the expert subtleties of N.K.V.D. (Soviet Secret Police) interrogators at Minsk and Kharkov. No prisoner can forget Kharkov. In pain and filth and degradation they try to turn a man into a whimpering beast.

The air struck chill as we turned a last bend in the corridor, walked down some steps and emerged into a cobbled courtyard. I gave my trousers a hitch and stepped out to keep up with my guards, neither of whom had spoken since we left the cell. On the other side of the yard we pulled up in front of a heavy door. One of them pulled me back a pace by tugging at the loose unfastened blouse which, with the trousers, formed my prison outfit. They stepped up as the door opened, jogging me forward into the arms of two other uniformed men who quickly ran their hands over me in a search for hidden weapons. No word was spoken. I was escorted to another door inside the building. It opened as though by some secret signal and I was pushed through. The recess of the door on the inside was curtained and I was shoved through again. The door closed behind me. Two guards, new ones this time, fell in behind me at attention.

The room was large and pleasantly warm. The walls were cleanly white-painted or whitewashed. Bisecting the room was a massive bench-type table. On this side, bare of the smallest stick of furniture, I and the guards had the whole space to ourselves. Ranged along the other side of the table were about fifteen people, about ten of them in the blue uniforms of the N.K.V.D., the rest in civilian clothes. They were very much at ease, talking, laughing, gesticulating and smoking cigarettes. Not one

of them spared me even a casual glance.

After ten minutes or so I shuffled my feet in their canvas shoes (they had lace-holes but no laces) on the polished wooden parquet floor and wondered if a mistake had been made. Somebody has blundered, I thought. I shouldn't really be here at all. Then an N.K.V.D. captain looked our way and told the guards to stand at ease. I heard their boots thump behind me.

I stood there trying not to fidget, and looked round. I surprised myself with the discovery that for the first time in weary months I was faintly enjoying a new experience. Everything was so clean. There was a comforting air of informality all round. I was almost in touch with the world outside prison walls. In and out of the room passed a steady stream of people, laughing and chatting with the crowd behind the table, elbows sprawling over the magnificent red plush covering. Someone asked when an N.K.V.D. major expected to get his holidays. There were happy inquiries about someone else's large family. One man, impeccably dressed in a Western-style dark grey suit, looked like a successful diplomat. Everyone seemed to have a word for him. They called him Mischa. I was to remember Mischa very well. I shall never forget him.

On the wall facing me on the other side of the table was the Soviet emblem, cast in some kind of plaster and lavishly coloured. On each side of it were the portraits of Russian leaders, dominated by a stern-faced Stalin. I was able to look round now with frank interest. No one bothered me. I switched my trousers grip from my left hand to my right hand. I noted there were three curtained doorways into the room. There was a single telephone, I observed, on the long table. In front of the central position on the great table was an old-fashioned solid brass pen-stand in the form of an anchor and two crossed oars, with a glass inkwell, both standing on a massive marble or alabaster base.

And all the time the everyday conversation flowed across to me from the other side of the table and I, to whom no single kind word had been spoken for a year, who had drifted deeper and deeper into isolated depression under the rigidly-enforced prison rule of absolute silence, felt this was a most memorable day.

Standing there in my dirty, shapeless, two-piece prison rags, I was not conscious of any sense of incongruity before the cheerful and well-dressed Russians. The fastidious pride of the Polish cavalry officer had been the first thing they attacked back in Minsk ten months before. It was a callous public stripping, the preliminary to my first interrogation. The Russian officers lolled around smiling as I was forced to strip off my uniform, my fine shirt, my boots, socks and underwear. I stood before them robbed of dignity, desperately ashamed, knowing fearfully that this was the real start of whatever four things were to befall me. And when they had looked me over and laughed and finally turned their backs on me, then, a long time afterwards, I was thrown my prisoner's trousers and *rubashka*, the Russian shirt-blouse. Gripping those damned, hateful trousers, closely watching my tormentors, I heard for the first time the questionnaire that was to become the theme of my prison life.

Name? Age? Date of birth? Where born? Parents' names? Their nationality? Father's occupation? Mother's maiden name? Her nationality? The pattern was always the same. The questions at the start came in the order they were set out in the documents flourished in the hands of the investigators. They were quite pleasant at that first interrogation. They gave me coffee and appeared not to notice my awkwardness in handling the cup with my one free hand. One of them handed me a cigarette, turned back in nicely-simulated dismay at the apparent realization that I could not one-handedly light it for myself and then lit it for me.

Then the other questions. The dangerous questions.

Where were you on 2 August 1939? In the Polish Army mobilized against the Germans in the West I would say.

But, they would say, you know Eastern Poland very well. Your family lived at Pinsk. Quite near the Polish border with Russia, is it not? Quite easy for a well-educated young man like you to take a trip

across, wasn't it?

Careful denials, blacking out of my mind the memories of teen-age trips to the villages across the Russian border. Then the speeding up of the tempo. Two of them firing alternate questions. A string of Russian border village names. Do you know this place or that place. This man you must have met. We know you met him. Our Communist underground movement had you followed. We always knew the people you met. We know what passed between you. Were you working for the *Dwojka* (Army Intelligence)?

You speak Russian fluently? – Yes, my mother is Russian.

She taught you Russian? – Yes, since I was a boy.

And the *Dwojka* were very happy to have a Polish officer who could speak Russian and spy for them? – No. I was a cavalry officer. I fought in the West, not the East.

Then would come the pay-off line. In this first interrogation it was delivered in an affable, we-are-all-good-fellows-together manner. A document was placed before me, a pen put in my hand. 'This,' said the smiling N.K.V.D. major, 'is the questionnaire to which you have given us your answers. Just sign here and we shan't have to bother you any more.' I didn't sign. I said I could not sign a document the contents of which were withheld from me. The major smiled, shrugged his shoulders. 'You *will* sign, you know – some day you will sign. I feel sorry for you that you do not sign today. Very, very sorry.'

He must have been thinking of Kharkov.

So opened the battle of wills between Slavomir Rawicz and the men of the N.K.V.D. Quite early I realized they had no specific information against me. They knew only what my Army dossier revealed and what they could pick up in Pinsk about my family background. Their charges were based entirely on the conviction that all Poles of middle or upper class education living on the Russian border were inevitably spies, men who had worked stealthily and powerfully against the Russian day of Liberation. I knew none of the places they mentioned, none of the men they sought to get me to acknowledge as confederates. There were times when I was tempted to relieve the anguish of soul and body by admitting acquaintance with the strangers they mentioned. I never did. In my mind, even in my deepest extremity of spirit, I knew that any such admission would be surely fatal.

The great stone fortress prison of Kharkov opened its grim gates to me in April 1940. Mildly conditioned by the rigours of Minsk I was still unprepared for the horrors of Kharkov. Here the phenomenal genius of an N.K.V.D. major nicknamed The Bull flourished. He weighed about fifteen stone. He was ginger-haired, with luxurious growths on head, on chest and on the backs of his huge red hands. He had a long, powerful body, short, sturdy legs and long, heavy arms. A shining red face topped a bulging great neck. He took his job as chief interrogator with deadly seriousness. He hated with frightening thoroughness the prisoner who failed to capitulate. He certainly hated me. And I, even now, would kill him, without compunction and with abounding happiness.

The Bull must have been something special even in the N.K.V.D. He ran his interrogation sessions like an eminent surgeon, always showing off his skill before a changing crowd of junior officers, assembled like students at an interesting operation. His methods were despicably ingenious. The breaking-down process for difficult prisoners started in the *kishka*, a chimney-like cell into which one stepped down about a foot below the level of the corridor outside. Inside a man could stand and no more. The walls pressed round like a stone coffin. Twenty feet above there was the diffused light from some small, out-of-sight window. The door was opened only to allow a prisoner to be marched for an appointment with The Bull. We excreted standing up and stood in our own filth. The *kishka* was never cleaned – and I spent six months in the one provided for me at Kharkov. Before going to see The Bull I would be taken to the 'wash-house' – a small room with a pump. There were no refinements. No soap was provided. I would strip and pump the cold water over my clothes, rub them, stamp on them,

wring them and then put them back on to dry on my body.

The questions were the same. They came from the same sheaf of documents which travelled with me from prison to prison. But The Bull was far more pressing in his absorbing desire to get my signature. He swore with great and filthy fluency. He lost his temper explosively and frequently. One day, after hours of unremitting bawling and threatening, he suddenly pulled out his service pistol. Eyes blazing, the veins on his neck standing out, he put the barrel to my temple. He stood quivering for almost thirty seconds as I closed my eyes and waited. Then he stood back and slammed the pistol butt into my right jaw. I spat out all the teeth on that side. The next day, my face puffed out, the inside of my mouth still lacerated and bleeding, I met him again. He was smiling. His little knot of admirers looked interestedly at his handiwork. 'You look lop-sided,' he said. And he hit me with the pistol butt on the other side. I spat out more teeth. 'That will square your face up,' he said.

There was the day when a patch of hair about the size of a halfcrown was shaved from the crown of my head. I sat through a forty-eight-hour interrogation with my buttocks barely touching the edge of chair seat while Russian soldiers took over the duty in relays of tapping the bare spot on my head at the precise interval of once every two seconds. While The Bull roared his questions and leered and, with elephantine show of occasional pleasantry, cajoled me to sign that cursed document.

Then back to the *kishka*, to the clinging, sickening stench, to hours of awful half-sleep. The *kishka* was well named: it means 'the intestine' or 'the gut'. When I came to – usually when my tired knees buckled and I had to straighten up again – I had only The Bull to think about. He filled my life completely. There were one or two occasions when the guard on duty pushed through to me a lighted cigarette. These were the only human gestures made to me at Kharkov. I could have cried with gratitude.

There were times when I thought I was there for life. The Bull seemed prepared to continue working on me for ever. My eyes ran copious tears from the long sessions under powerful arc lamps. Strapped on my back on a narrow bench I would be staring direct into the light as he walked round and round in semi-gloom outside its focus, interminably questioning, insulting, consigning me to the deepest hell reserved for stubborn, cunning, bastard Polish spies and enemies of the Soviet. There was something obscene about his untiring energy and brute strength. When my blurred eyes began to close he would prop them open with little sticks. The dripping water trick was one of his specialities. From a container precisely placed over the bench an icy drop of water hit exactly the same spot on my head steadily at well-regulated intervals for hours on end.

Day and night had no meaning. The Bull sent for me when he felt like it, and that could as well be midnight as at dawn or any other hour. There was always a dull curiosity to guess what he had thought up for me. The guards would take me down the corridors, open the door and push me in. There was the time when The Bull was waiting for me with half-a-dozen of his N.K.V.D. pupils. They formed a little lane, three each side, and the mastermind stood back from them a couple of paces. I had to pass between them to reach him. No word was spoken. A terrific clout above the ear hurled me from one silent rank to the other. Grimly and efficiently they beat me up from one side to the other. They kicked me to my feet when I slumped down, and when it was over and I could not get up again, The Bull walked over and gave me one final paralysing kick in the ribs. Then they lifted me on to the edge of the same old chair and the questioning went on, the document was waved in my face, a pen was thrust at me.

Sometimes I would say to him, 'Let me read the document. You can't expect me to sign something I have not read.' But he would never let me read. His thick finger would point to the space where I was to sign. 'All you have to do is to put your name here and I will leave you alone.'

'Have a cigarette?' he said to me on one occasion. He lit one for himself, one for me. Then he walked quietly over and stubbed mine out on the back of my hand, very hard. On that occasion I had

been sitting on the edge of the chair until – as always happened – the muscles of the back and legs seized up in excruciating cramp. He walked round behind me as I rubbed the burn and kicked the chair from beneath me. I crashed on to the stone floor.

As a new and lively diversion towards the end of my stay at Kharkov, The Bull showed off with a Cossack knife, of which he seemed very proud. He demonstrated its excellent steel and keen edge on my chest, and I still have those scars to remind me of his undoubted dexterity and ingenuity.

There was a day near the end when he was waiting alone for me. He was quiet. There were none of the usual obscene greetings. And when he spoke the normally harsh, strident voice was low and controlled. As he talked I realized he was *appealing* to me to sign that paper. He was almost abject. I thought he might blubber. In my mind I kept saying to myself, ‘No, not now, you fat pig. Not now. Not after all this . . .’ I did not trust myself to speak. I shook my head. And he cursed me and cursed me, with violent and passionate intensity, foully and exhaustively.

How much can a man, weakened with ill-feeding and physical violence, stand? The limit of endurance, I found, was long after a tortured body had cried in agony for relief. I never consciously reached the final depth of capitulation. One small, steadfast part of my mind held to the unshakable idea that it was death to give in. So long as I wanted to live – and I was only a young man – I had the last, uttermost, strength of will to resist them, to push away that document which a scrawl of pen on paper might convert into my death warrant.

But there was a long night when they fed me with some dried fish before I was taken to the interrogation room. I retain some fairly clear memory of all the many sessions except this one. My head swam, I drooled, I could not get my eyes to align on anything. Often I almost fell off my chair. The cuffings and shakings seemed not to worry me and when I tried to talk my tongue was thick in my mouth. Vaguely I remember the paper and the pen being thrust at me, but, like a celebrating drunk might feel after a heavy night, there is no memory of the end of that interview.

In the morning when I came back to life I pulled my face away from the wall of my cell and smelt a new and peculiar smell. In the dim light the wall where my mouth had rested showed a wide, greenish stain. I was really frightened as I stood there, weighed down by a truly colossal feeling of oppression like the father of all hang-overs. They drugged you, I kept telling myself. They drugged you with the fish. What have you told them? I didn’t think I could possibly have signed their damned paper, but I couldn’t remember. I felt ill and low and very worried.

Quite soon afterwards I was moved to Moscow and the Lubyanka. The guards were chatty and smiling as I left. This was a feature of Pinsk and Minsk, now Kharkov and later Moscow. The guards acted on my departure as if they were glad I was leaving. They talked freely, joked a little. Maybe it was their way of showing a sympathy in which earlier they could not indulge.

Conditions at the Lubyanka were a little easier. My reputation as a recalcitrant had obviously preceded me because I was very soon consigned to the *kishka*. But this *kishka* was clean and the periods I was forced to spend in it were shorter.

The interrogation team at the Lubyanka nevertheless tried out their special powers of persuasion on me. It was possibly a matter of metropolitan pride to try to succeed where the provincial boys had failed. There were the usual questions, the repeated demands for my signature, some manhandling, references to the filthy, spying Poles. But there was only one torture trick of which The Bull might have been envious.

They strapped me with my feet pulled stiffly out under the now familiar ‘operation table’. My arms were stretched out along the table surface, each hand tied and held separately. My body was arched in a straining bow around the table end and the pain grew into searing agony as they hauled taut on the straps. This, however, was preparatory stuff like climbing into the dentist’s chair with raging toothache. The operation was yet to come. Over the table was suspended an old-fashioned small

cauldron fitted with a spout. It contained hot tar. There followed the usual pressing invitation to sign, with a promise that if I agreed I should be released immediately and returned to my cell. I think they would have been most disappointed if at that stage I had agreed to sign. The first drop of tar was hell. It burned savagely into the back of my hand and held its heat a long time on the puckered and livid skin. That first drop was the worst. It was the peak of pain. The rest were faintly anti-climax. I held on to consciousness and to my will to resist. When they said I should be glad to sign with my left hand at the end of the session, I proved them wrong. I had learned my fortitude in a very hard school.

That was the last major assault. I had been in the Lubyanka only about two weeks when I was led forth to my first and only experience of a Soviet court of justice.

Trial and Sentence

THE LIVELY buzz of conversation in the courtroom suddenly died down. Mischa, his snow-white collar and shirt and elegant grey silk tie eye-catching among the uniforms and the normal utilitarian Russian civilian dress, said brightly, 'Well, I suppose we might as well make a start.' I had been standing there for about half-an-hour and for the first time the members of the court looked at me. The guards behind me thumped to attention. Sheaves of papers were handed round.

The central seat on the long table was taken by a quiet-voiced, white-haired Russian of about 60. He wore the customary long jacket over his buttoned-to-the-throat blouse, which was black, ornamented at the neck and cuffs with cross-stitching embroidery in green and red. Flanking him were two N.K.V.D. officers in their dark blue uniforms with red flashes on the collar and red hat-bands round their military peaked caps. Mischa's seat was at the end of the table to my left. He, I was to learn, was the chief prosecutor, and as the court prepared to start work he sat coolly looking me over. I hitched my trousers and looked at a point just above the President's head.

It was the President, who, after a whispered consultation with the officers beside him, started the proceedings. The opening gambit was one I now knew by heart. Name? Age? Date of birth? Where born? Parents' names? Their nationality? Father's occupation? Mother's maiden name? And so on through the long catalogue lying before him, complete, I have no doubt, with the answers I had wearily repeated in all my encounters with the N.K.V.D. from my arrest in Pinsk to my arrival in Moscow. If by this repetition they hoped I might vary an occasional answer, it was poor psychology. So often had I answered that any one of these questions produced always the same reply because I had ceased to have to think. It had become habit, a reflex action. The same old questions, the same old answers . . .

The charges were read over to me. The President (this may not have been his title but it appeared to be his function) took a long time going through the indictment. It bristled with place-names, the names of alleged Polish 'reactionaries', and dates covering a period of years on which I was accused of having committed specific acts of espionage against the Soviet Union. Their scope was so sweeping that I have never ceased to marvel that they missed the occasions when, as a teen-ager looking for danger and adventure, I *had* indeed crossed the Polish-Russian border. These charges were completely without foundation and I felt some satisfaction in the thought that if they could not torture me into admission of them in the specially-equipped interrogation rooms of a series of Russian prisons, they were unlikely to get me to change my tune in the comparatively pleasant and civilized atmosphere of this court.

As the questioning really got under way I found myself grudgingly admiring the resolute singleness of purpose of the official Russian mind. All this I had gone through before in a series of appalling nightmares. Now, in the light of day, having emerged from the twisting, horror-filled corridors of

frustration and despair, I found the dream persisting. Shortly stated, the indictment might have read: *You, Slavomir Rawicz, being a well-educated middle-class Pole and an officer in the anti-Russian Polish Army, having a home near the Russian border, are therefore beyond any question of doubt a Polish spy and an enemy of the people of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.* It remained only for the court to ask, with some asperity, why waste our time with denials?

After two hours the guards behind me were replaced. I found that the changing of the escort every two hours was the regular procedure throughout the trial. I went on answering the President's questions. They afforded me no difficulty because they were the long, routine preliminaries. I had not yet reached the point where I had to think, to recognize a flash of danger and avoid some carefully-baited trap. Although it must have been clearly stated many times in the documents before him that I spoke fluent Russian, the President had meticulously repeated the question 'Do you understand and speak Russian?' Thereafter all the proceedings were in Russian and most of the questions were tinged with the special distrust which all Russians seem to have for the foreigner who knows their language. The underlying suspicion is that no foreigner would learn Russian if he did not want to be a spy.

As I stood there I was shaping my plans. I decided it would be to my advantage not to antagonize the court. I freely admitted those facts which were undeniable. Where an accusation was manifestly false I refuted it but asked the court's permission to explain why it was so. They let me talk quite a lot. I agreed with this, partially acknowledged that, denied most things and almost eagerly did my explaining. The atmosphere was hostile but faintly interested in my methods. The rigid nature of the questions left me under no illusion that I could change the official attitude, but at least I felt I was not worsening my position by appearing anxious to co-operate with the court.

The informality of the proceedings impressed me. The members of the court smoked cigarettes endlessly. The stream of visitors I had noted while I was waiting for things to start continued while the hearing was on. There was a constant mutter of behind-the-scenes talking, little murmured exchanges with the men on the long table, smiles, hands laid on shoulders in a friendly and confidential way. As I listened and talked I observed all the new sights and sounds. Like a man at a theatre, I tried to assess the importance and significance of each character in order of appearance.

Most intriguing was a distinguished-looking man in uniform, tall, with white-streaked hair, who strolled through one of the curtained doors when the trial had been in progress about three hours. The President was half-way through a question when one of his flanking N.K.V.D. officers nudged him and inclined his head towards the door. The newcomer, his hand still holding the curtain, was looking round the court. His glance took me in, paused on my two guards and swung to the judicial bench. The President leapt to his feet. All the officials stood with great haste. There was a great scraping of heavy chairs. He had a nervous look, this distinguished visitor, a tense jerky gait as he walked over towards the beaming President. There were polite murmurs as he passed all the way down the table, of which I picked out repeatedly the greeting 'Comrade Colonel'. The President shook hands warmly with Comrade Colonel and Comrade Colonel listened in a detached way to the President's few remarks. Then he turned about, gave a smiling nod to the elegant Mischa and stood against the wall near the door through which he had arrived.

Comrade Colonel made some gesture and the court resumed its seat. The questioning was resumed. The visitor listened with apparent boredom, glanced up to the ceiling, appeared to be wrapped up in thoughts of things far more weighty than the trial of a mere Pole, and then, after about ten minutes slipped quietly out the way he had come.

About two o'clock in the afternoon the President yielded his place to a younger man and went off, presumably to lunch. There were changes among the officials in other parts of the long table. In this type of court it was apparently not necessary to preserve continuity. Anyone who had read the depositions could take over to give the principals a rest. The deputy-President had an air of efficiency.

which the older man lacked. His questioning was quicker, left less time to think. But he was not unpleasant, and soon after taking over he astonished me by offering me a cigarette. There was no catch. An official brought me a cigarette and lit it for me. I drew the smoke in and felt good. Before the end of the day they gave me another. Two cigarettes in a day. I felt that perhaps the signs were auspicious.

Comrade Colonel looked in once more during the afternoon, walked along the long table, picked up documents, laid them down, nervously exchanged words with two or three of the top men, and slipped out again. The examination went on.

The second change of guard at my back marked the passage of another two hours. Mischa now put in some rather leisurely cross-examination. Occasionally he smiled. I answered with a show of great willingness. I thought what a welcome change it was to be dealing with a man who seemed to have brought back with his stylish Western clothes some of the niceties of another civilization.

It almost seemed to me that there was even a remote touch of sympathy when they asked me about my wife. It was a brief enough story. I married Vera at Pinsk on 5 July 1939, during a forty-eight-hour leave from the Army. My mother called me from my place at the table during the wedding feast on the pretext I was wanted on the telephone. She handed me a telegram which ordered my immediate return to my unit. I packed my bags. Vera cried as I kissed her goodbye. The tears streamed down as she stroked my hair and face. So I went away, and most of the wedding guests did not know I had gone. A fortnight later I was able to get permission for her to come and stay near me at Ozharov. She stayed for four or five days and I was able to see her for about three hours a day. They were glorious, wonderful hours, in which we almost succeeded in banishing the sense of doom which hung heavily over us and over all Poland. It was all the married life I was to know with Vera. When I had fought the Germans in the West and the Russians had pushed in from the East I went back to Pinsk. The N.K.V.D. moved very swiftly. I had barely time to greet Vera, to answer her first eager questions, when they walked in. That was the last time I saw her.

About mid-afternoon when I had been standing before the court for well over four hours, the deputy-President asked me if I would like a cup of coffee. I said 'Yes, please.' That was when I was also given my second cigarette. The coffee was excellent – hot, strong and sweetened. When I had drunk and smoked – the coffee first and the cigarette afterwards because of my clumsy one-handedness – there were a few questions from a burly civilian at the opposite end of the table from Mischa. This man, I gathered, was my defence counsel. He showed every sign of irritation at the role he was forced to play and gave me the impression of being barely able to conceal his contempt for me. He took very little part in the trial and certainly his intervention at any stage did nothing to advance my cause. He was, at best, a most reluctant champion.

The day's proceedings ended rather abruptly at about four o'clock. One of the two centre-of-the-table officers whispered to the deputy-President. An officer called my guards to attention and I was turned about and marched back to my cell. Food was brought me and I sat down to ponder the events of the day. I decided that my trial must be over, that there remained now only the formality of being told the sentence of the court. I did not think I had done badly this day. I even cherished a slight hope that the sentence would be light. That night I slept very well. It was the most restful night I had enjoyed for many months.

The guards came for me at seven the next morning. The weather was misty and the damp chill struck through my clothes and caused me to shiver as we walked across the cobbled yard to the court building. There was the routine search at the entrance inside the big doors and again I was pushed through the curtained door to my place facing the long table.

But things inside were much different from yesterday. The tribunal, all of them with a sour-faced, early-morning look, were ready and waiting for me. There was none of yesterday's badinage. The

Soviet Supreme Court was showing me a very cold and businesslike face. The tribunal was the same as that which had sat at the end of yesterday – the younger deputy-President in the middle, his two N.K.V.D. advisers on right and left. This is it, I thought. They are going to announce my sentence. I stood up straight and waited. The gentlemen of the court stared at me.

A quick shuffling of papers and the trial restarted. The deputy-President whipped out the questions. Name? . . . Age? . . . Where born? . . . The same routine. It was as though I had never before seen this white-walled courtroom. Yesterday might never have been. There was a new and forceful insistence about the catechism, as though my answers of the day before had been shrugged away, wiped off the slate. For the first half-hour I fought with waves of engulfing depression. I felt utterly miserable, downcast almost to breaking point. I told myself bitterly what a hopeful and stupid fool I had been to delude myself into thinking they would let me go so easily. I had relaxed and now I had to fight again and the fight was all the harder for having allowed myself to weaken. These men and the men of Minsk and Kharkov were all Russians, motivated by the same hatreds, working along the same lines, one-tracked.

I was bawled at, my answers were cut off half-heard, the table was thumped until the heavy inkstand leapt up and rattled back. Polish spy. Polish traitor. Polish bastard. Polish fascist. Insults were thrown in with the questions.

A new and tense, unsmiling Mischa rose to continue the questioning. The court was for a moment quiet as he stood there eyeing me. Behind the presidential chair stood three young civilians I had not seen before. Each had a little notebook. They looked expectantly towards the chief prosecutor. I remember thinking back to The Bull and his coterie of apprentices.

‘Now, Rawicz, you Polish son of a bitch,’ he said, ‘we have finished pandering to your stupidity. You know you are a dirty spy and you are going to tell us all about it.’

‘I have told you all I know,’ I said. ‘There is nothing more to tell. I have nothing to hide.’

Dramatically, Mischa walked from behind the table, took about ten steady paces and pulled up in front of me. ‘You,’ he said, ‘are a professional liar.’ Then, very deliberately, he smacked me across the face with the full fling of his arm, once, twice, three times, four times. And as I shook my head he added, ‘But I will *make* you tell the truth.’ He turned abruptly, strode back to his place at the table. The young observers behind the presidential chair jotted furiously in their little notebooks.

I stood there shaking, hating him and them and all the Russians, all they were and all they represented. For fully fifteen minutes I shut my ears to a barrage of insults and questions and, tight-lipped, refused to answer. My cheeks burned from the face-slapping, a cut inside my mouth bled and I could taste the salt blood. Finally I talked because I knew I must go on fighting them to the end. I chose my moment to break silence when Mischa spoke three names – all unknown to me – of men he claimed to be self-confessed spies against Russia and who were witnesses of my own treacherous activities.

‘Why don’t you bring them here and confront me with them?’ I asked. ‘Maybe we will, maybe we will,’ said Mischa. But no ‘witnesses’ were ever produced against me. There was no real case against me. Except, perhaps that I was a Pole. That indeed seemed to be a grave offence against the Russians.

I cannot remember all the questions, but I do remember Mischa’s skill as a prosecutor. He was adept at leading me along a clear path of places and people I knew so that I could almost anticipate the next question and have my answer half-formed. Then, abruptly, with no change of tempo there would be another town mentioned, another name. I would pause to get on to the new track and Mischa would shout in triumph, ‘So, you Polish dog, that question stops your lying mouth! *That* was where you handed over your spy reports!’ A torrent of abuse and accusations would follow as I kept repeating that I knew neither the town nor the man he mentioned.

The day before, when I had been expansive and friendly, I had talked about the happy days when I

went duck-shooting with my father in the Pripet Marshes. Today, Mischa used this as a theme for a blistering, blustering attack on my character as a spy and saboteur. Beyond the Pripet was Russia and Mischa did not intend that either I or the court should forget it. Yesterday I had quietly boasted of my prowess with a sporting gun. Today I was not only the most despicable of spies but also a well-trained potential assassin, a crack-shot hireling of Polish Army Intelligence. And so it went on.

It was a crazy trial, run by madmen. It became in the end a test of endurance between one weak, half-starved, ill-used Pole and the powerful, time-squandering State machine. I had been given no food before I came in and I received nothing throughout the long day's trial that ended, astonishingly at midnight. Seventeen hours I stood there. There were no cigarettes, no coffee. Mischa would occasionally step out and punch or slap me, especially when I looked like keeling over or nodding to sleep on my feet.

Everyone else in the court, Mischa included, took a break at intervals during the day. Other people took over the examination. The composition of the court was constantly changing. During the afternoon the President came in for a few hours to allow his deputy a rest. The guards were regularly changed every two hours. Only I went on standing there, dry-throated, swaying, wondering dully if this day would ever end.

When I stumbled back into my cell there was still no food for me. At 7 a.m. the next day when I waded back again I was still without food and again, hungry, aching and deathly tired, I survived another marathon madmen's session of Soviet justice. Why do they do it, I kept asking myself. Why do they waste all this time on one Pole? Why don't they just sentence me and have done with it? For myself, I could have admitted all the things they charged me with and ended it all. But I still did not want to die. For me it was a struggle for life.

They did not break me down. They even re-introduced the Kharkov trick of taking me off my staggering feet and sitting me on the edge of a chair for a few hours. It got painful, but it was at least a change from trying to stop my knees buckling under me.

The fourth day was the last. There seemed to be many more people there than at any previous stage. I imagine all those officials who from time to time had acted as stand-ins for the principals wanted to be present for the last act. The atmosphere was much the same as it had been on the first day. The President was back in his accustomed position, riffling through his sheaf of papers. Everybody talked and Mischa was in laughing conversation with an N.K.V.D. captain.

The old preliminaries were gone through. Again I identified myself. I was tired, sick and still unfeeling. There were some more questions, which I answered automatically. They were straightforward and unbaited.

The President then asked me if I would give the court a specimen of my signature. When I hesitated, he made it clear that I was not being asked to sign any document. Someone came forward with a small piece of paper, a slip only big enough to take my name. I turned it over in my hand. Someone said, 'We only want to see how you sign your name.' I took the pencil held out to me and wrote my name. The President glanced at the slip, passed it along to the two N.K.V.D. men. All three remained in a huddle for a couple of minutes. The President looked at me, held up the slip in his right hand, screwed it up and threw it away.

The President held up a document. A court official took it from him and brought it over to me. 'Is that your signature?' asked the President. I looked closely for a full minute while the court waited. It was my signature. Wavery and thin. But unmistakably my signature. Kharkov, I thought. That night at Kharkov.

'Is that your signature?' repeated the President.

'Yes,' I said. 'But I do not remember signing and it does not mean I admit anything contained in this document.'

‘That document,’ he continued, ‘is a full list of the charges against you.’

‘I know it well,’ I replied. ~~‘But no one would ever let me read it. I never knowingly signed it.’~~

‘It is your signature, nevertheless?’

‘It is my signature, but I cannot remember writing it.’

There were whispered consultations up and down the table. The President stood, the court stood. He read the charges at length. He announced that the court had found me guilty of espionage and plotting against the people of the U.S.S.R. It took quite a long time to get through all this and all I was waiting for was the sentence. It came at last.

‘You will therefore be sentenced to twenty-five years forced labour.’

‘And that,’ said the blue-uniformed major on the President’s right, ‘should be ample time to restore your shocking memory.’

I stood there for a moment looking down the table. I caught the eye of Mischa, the elegant, well-groomed Mischa. He was standing back slightly from the table. He smiled. There was no malice in that smile. It was friendly, the smile of a man who is stepping forward to shake your hand. It was almost as though he were encouraging me, complimenting me on the show I had put up. He was still smiling when one of the guards tugged at my blouse to turn me round. I passed through the curtain and was taken back to my cell.

Food was brought to me, a big meal by prison standards, and drink. The guards talked again. I felt great weight had been lifted from me. I slept.

From Prison to Cattle Truck

THERE WAS evidence the next day that the prison authorities had taken immediate note of my change in status from having been a prisoner under interrogation and trial to that of prisoner under sentence. I was restored to full rations – coffee and 100 grammes of the usual black rye bread at 7 a.m. and, in the evening, another 100 grammes of bread and a bowl of soup. The soup was merely the water in which turnips had been boiled, without salt or any seasoning, but it was a welcome change of diet.

I was awarded, too, my first hot bath since my arrest. The wash-house to which I was escorted by my two guards was about twenty yards from my cell and differed from the others I had used only in having two taps in the wall instead of one. Off came my *rubashka*, I stepped out of my trousers and canvas shoes and stood in the shallow sink let into the stone floor. I turned on the right-hand tap and the hot water gushed out. There was no towel, no soap, but this was luxury. I jumped about, bent down against the tap and let the water run over me from head to foot, rubbed myself until my pale skin began to glow pink.

The two guards, one armed with a Nagan-type pistol in an unbuttoned holster, the other with a carbine, lounged one each side of the door watching my antics. Said one, 'You will be all right now. You are going away from here.' 'When?' I asked quickly. 'Where to?' Both guards ignored the questions. I carried on with my bath, making it last as long as I could. Then I turned off the tap and danced about to get dry. I dabbed at myself with my blouse and finally ran some water over my clothes and kneaded the prison dirt out of them until it flowed away in a dark stream down the hole in the sink. I rinsed them, wrung them, shook them and put them back on my body, the steam still rising from them. 'You look a nice clean boy now,' said the man with the carbine. 'Let's go.'

Back in my cell I was given a cigarette. One of the guards rolled the cigarette, lit it and then put it down on the floor. As he walked back I moved forward and picked it up. This was always the procedure when I was given a smoke. No guard would directly hand the cigarette to me, and if it went out before I took my first puff a single match would be thrown to me. The used match would be picked up and removed from the cell. Most of the many rigid security measures had obvious significance, but I could never quite appreciate the need for this elaborate care over a cigarette in the presence of two fully-armed men in the heart of a prison like the Lubyanka.

In spite of the fact that a prisoner was hopelessly equipped to attempt escape, the security drill was unvarying. A prisoner leaving or returning to his cell was always escorted by two guards. When a man was being taken out the guards took up position one at each side of the door. The prisoner would advance between them and halt a pace ahead of them. The instruction would then be given, to quote a typical example: 'You will walk down this corridor on the left, turn right at the end and keep going until you are told to stop. Keep to the middle of the corridor all the way.' These instructions were usually ended by the recital of an ominous little jingle which went:

‘Step to the Right,
Step to the Left –
Attempt to Escape.’

I must have heard that warning hundreds of times during my captivity. All guards used it, all prisoners knew it. The Russians took great pains to explain to a prisoner exactly where he was to go and the prisoner was left in no doubt that a deviation off course to right or left would mean death from the carbine or pistol of the guards marching two paces behind him. In the Lubyanka it seemed to be an excessive and almost ridiculous precaution, but later, when thousands of captives were being moved from one end of Russia to the other and escape became at least a possibility, the warning sounded sensible enough from the Russian point of view.

On the morning of the fourth day after my sentence an N.K.V.D. lieutenant entered my cell. ‘Can you read Russian?’ he asked. ‘Yes,’ I answered. He handed me a document which I found was a movement permit. Even convicted men apparently needed a permit to change their place of residence although it might be a move only from prison to prison. The officer handed me a pen and I signed my name on the paper. He pocketed the permit and left.

Towards dusk on this mid-November afternoon in 1940 I quit my Lubyanka cell for the last time. I was marched out into the prison yard. Snow was drifting down and the cold had an edge which made me draw in my breath. Around the yard were a number of small buildings. At one end were the massive main gates, near which were two red brick storehouses. I was led to one of these and handed a brown paper parcel. The man who gave it me said, ‘This is for your journey,’ and smiled.

As I stood in the yard, one hand holding on to my trousers, the other gripping my parcel, I felt myself shivering with cold and with excitement. There was a great sense of freedom. I told myself, ‘Slav, my friend, this is goodbye to prisons. Wherever they take you, it won’t be to another stinking prison.’ I felt faintly elated. Whatever was ahead of me, here I was already breathing in good, clean, cold air and knowing I was going somewhere – not from cell to cell, from prison to prison, from one interrogator to another, but to a new life, a chance to work, to use my hands again, to meet and talk with other men . . .

Those other men, my fellow prisoners, were even now being escorted in small batches into the yard. I could feel my heart thumping as I watched each one of them arrive. I stared and stared. They eyed me and one another in the same way. We were all looking for someone we knew. But the odd thing borne in on me was that recognition was impossible. We were all in complete and uniform disguise. We were all longhaired and heavily bearded – I had not had a haircut or shave for nearly a year, but it had never occurred to me that all the others would have been treated alike. Our clothes were the same. When we had all been herded into the yard there were about 150 men like me all holding on to their trousers. One hundred and fifty lost souls turning up in the same pitiful costume at some devil’s fancy dress ball, each with a neat brown paper parcel in one hand and a pair of trousers in the other. The corners of my mouth twitched and I could almost have laughed, but suddenly I felt a choking wave of pity for us all that they should make such fools of us.

This was my first encounter with any other prisoner. In Kharkov and the Lubyanka I had heard noises. I had heard men being shot. I had heard the awful howling of a man who is going mad. I had listened to scrapings and tappings as though someone was trying to communicate with me through a cell wall. But I was never allowed to meet any of the other unfortunates. Isolation was part of the treatment and I got it in full measure.

The business of assembling us, checking names against documents and counting heads took about two hours. During this period we were all made to squat in the snow – another security rule. Two

groups of about a dozen armed soldiers kept watch on us. There was little daylight left when we were ordered to our feet and loaded standing into five canvas-topped Army lorries. One lorry-load of soldiers headed the convoy and another followed in the rear. Tossed about and flung from side to side we were driven at breakneck speed for what seemed to be about ten miles before the brakes were slammed on and we pitched forward in mass. The convoy had stopped.

In that short, jolting ride, I could feel a tense, bubbling excitement all round me. It was an odd and powerful experience to be with other men again, to feel the thump of another shoulder, the sharp prod of an elbow in the ribs, to be reminded again of the smell of men in a packed crowd, to hear exclamations in rich, colloquial Polish. But that great surge of talk one might have expected did not come. We were to find it took some little time to recover the habit of conversation. It came back slowly by way of shouted little questions and short, jerky answers.

The place where the lorry convoy stopped was a small station on a branch line which I estimated to be about five miles outside Moscow. Someone later professed to know the place, gave it a name and said it was a suburb of scattered villas much favoured by the well-to-do Soviet official. As I jumped down from the lorry I saw in the distance the lights of houses, well spaced out, which might support the theory, but there were no civilians around and the prisoners and soldiers had the place to themselves. Drawn up on the railway was a train of cattle trucks of the type which normally accommodated eight horses or cows in stalls, four each side, tails against the front and rear ends and heads pointing inwards to a small central gangway between the two truck doors. There was an engine with steam up at each end of the train.

The loading was carried out quickly. As the name of each man was called he stepped up to the door of the truck and two soldiers hoisted him in. Inside, two more soldiers packed the men around the truck walls, gradually filling the available space towards the centre until they were themselves inches back towards the door. When they had finished there were sixty men jammed immovably in my truck. All the cattle fittings had been removed except the steel rings to which their safety harness had been made fast, and the four barred ventilation openings had been covered from the outside by metal plates solidly bolted into position.

Two soldiers with some special armbands on their uniform looked in at the door and called out, 'We are first-aid men. If any of you feel ill during the journey, just call for us and we'll put you right.' The door was slammed shut and barred from the outside just when it seemed that those near the entrance were in danger of being forced out by the press like corks from a bottle. In the stuffy darkness someone raised a laugh about the first-aid men. 'How shall we attract their attention – ring 'em up on the phone?' And, in fact, in the weeks ahead no one in my truck ever saw the experts with the armbands exercising their first-aid skill. It was just one of the many ironies of Russian organization.

I was rammed hard against one end of the truck, my parcel still under one arm. Both arms were pressed into my body. It was impossible to sit and when I wanted to lift a hand I had to have the cooperation of the man next to me, who would lean back against his neighbour on the other side to squeeze out the extra space I needed. It was this anonymous friend who advised me to open my parcel and eat some food in case it might later be stolen. I explored the contents by feel and smell – and it was a rich and rewarding experience. There was a loaf of special bread, oval in shape, about nine inches long and about five inches across at the middle. There were two excellent dried fish of a kind known in Russia as *taran*. And there was an ounce of *korizhki*, the coarse tobacco made from the veins of tobacco leaves, with a sheet of newspaper (I later found it was dated 1938) to use for rolling cigarettes. I ate half the loaf and one of the fish and stuffed the rest into my blouse, wrapped still in the brown paper.

It was not until the train moved off that the talk began to flow. Voices began to speculate on where we were going. Some expressed the fear that we might end up in Novaya Zemlya, that bleakest of

islands in the Barents Sea, or in the Kamchatka salt mines of Eastern Siberia. Everyone agreed that our destination was Siberia.

One of the parting instructions as the door was slid home was that we were to make no noise. But as the train lumbered slowly into some kind of speed and the wheels began to rattle more loudly, we began to shout. Someone would bawl, 'Anyone here from Lvov?' A voice would answer from the other end of the truck, 'I come from near there,' but any attempt at sustained conversation died in the general hubbub. There were calls for men from this regiment and that regiment. Then the yelling quickly subsided and men began hopefully to engage the attention of their immediate neighbours. Some of the excitement of the occasion was still with me but I could not join in the general free-for-all of question and answer. It always took me time to thaw out. Up against the cold wall of that truck I listened to the others but still hugged my thoughts to myself, reluctant as yet to open out, to seek a friend, but happy just to be one of the crowd, to know I was not alone any more.

Later I found myself inquiring of those near me if anyone knew Pinsk. From my left came a voice which eagerly replied, 'Yes, I know Pinsk.' We tried each other with the names of people we knew, of streets, of surrounding villages. But his Pinsk was not my Pinsk and we could find no common ground. The effort died away. I felt disappointed, irritated at his failure to know the people and things I had known. I think he made another attempt to continue talking, but I could not bring myself to answer. I had been a half-hearted effort on my part anyway and I felt vaguely sorry I had started it.

The train stopped several times that first night and at each stop there were the sounds of men being unloaded from lorries and stuffed into the trucks in their hundreds. Men favourably placed against the long platform side of the truck found chinks in the planks through which to watch the proceedings in the light of searchlights shining down the train from the two engines and reported what they saw to the rest of us.

That first leg of our journey eastwards soon developed into a nightmare. We stayed locked in throughout the first night and all through the following day. There were, of course, no toilet facilities of even the crudest kind and men relieved themselves standing up, unable to move. The smell was foul, the air stank. When the train drew up at a signal check, men would shout for food and water and the guards would race along the train hammering on the truck sides with their gun butts and ordering silence, promising the trucks would be opened soon. It was bitterly cold for the prisoners around the truck walls. Even if those towards the middle would have changed position it was impossible to move. Twelve hours or so after my first meal on the train, I wormed my hand into my blouse and slowly ate the remainder of the bread and fish.

Those of us who had first joined the train had been locked in for nearly twenty-four hours when the train finally drew up on an isolated section of branch line and the truck doors were at last slid back. It was late afternoon and all we could see around was undulating, snow-covered country, with clumps of trees near the line and others dotted around in the distance. Some of my companions were too stiff from the long standing to get down unaided. All of us stretched and yawned and rubbed at our aching limbs to restore circulation. An old grenade wound in my ankle had started to open and the back of my right hand, on which the Lubyanka specialists had dropped hot tar, was puffed up and sore. There were ex-soldiers with much more serious untreated wounds than mine. I could only admire their courage. We could do nothing for them and the Russian first-aiders contributed not even an aspirin for their relief.

A knifing east wind whistled around the train. The snow had stopped falling and the wind seemed all the colder as a result. Russian soldiers were strategically placed in a flat arc around the open side of the train and there were patrolling guards on the blind side.

The first move was for security. We were ordered to squat in front of our truck and then were issued with the familiar lump of black bread. There was also a water issue which tasted of steam and train

oil. Afterwards we were allowed to walk in a carefully prescribed area and the request that a few men be allowed to walk a little farther afield to gather branches to clean out the truck was granted—on condition it was understood that ‘Step to the right, step to the left’ would be treated as an attempt to escape. The wind outside cut through our flimsy clothes and there was no lack of volunteers for cleaning the truck. They worked awhile inside and then jumped down to gulp in the clean air. Standing against the truck door a little later I saw that the steel bar used to lock us in was itself finally secured with a loop of wire and a lead seal. Not only locked in, I thought, but sealed. A finishing touch of absolute security.

The pattern of the journey became clearer thereafter. The general plan was to move us stealthily through sleeping towns at night and to halt on some branch line out in the country during the day. Signal delays and long stretches of inhabited country meant over-running the schedule until well into the daylight of a following day. On those occasions there was near panic among the soldiers and train staff. I often wonder what civilian Russians standing on station platforms made of the low murmur of voices which came from the long line of cattle trucks almost stopping or slowly crawling past them during these out-of-schedule morning runs.

Towards the end of the first week our sixty men had organized itself with rough community rules. A rota system was started to enable everyone in turn to enjoy the close-packed body warmth of the middle of the truck. Everyone in turn experienced the numbing cold of the truck walls. It was getting colder and colder and those perimeter positions were grim. This meant, too, that the favoured daylight spot of observer at the cracks and knotholes in the truck sides also went round. A good, loud-voiced look-out with his eye to a hole in the wood helped greatly to relieve the general boredom. Some of them could turn in a really entertaining commentary.

Shut in this dark travelling-box it was difficult to get any clear idea of the actual course of the journey. From the disjointed reports of men who may or may not have known the route followed I formed the idea that we must have made a number of fairly substantial detours in the progress through Western Russia. These may have been necessitated by traffic conditions and the points chosen for picking up prisoner road convoys. During the second week, however, when we approached the Urals and a third engine was coupled into the train, it became clear we were on the Trans-Siberian Railway and there could be no doubt that our destination lay somewhere in the vast reaches of fabulous Siberia. We clanked through nearly all the big towns and rail junctions at night. We always knew the junctions by the break in running rhythm as the wheels crossed a succession of points and by the noise of other trains and shunting engines.

One incident sticks vividly in my mind, especially since it was daylight and I had my eye to one of the wider cracks in the truck side. The train had been moving for nearly a fortnight and this was one of the occasions when there had been a number of hold-ups and we had not reached our prearranged hiding-place when dawn came. It was a junction, a big place. The city beyond was remarkable only for the fact that all the buildings seemed to be in red brick. The train had been creeping tentatively at something like ten miles an hour. It shuddered to a heavily-braked halt. A minute or so later it jerked off again, barely moving. And then I saw, drawing slowly alongside, another train of trucks, just like ours, on the parallel track.

I called out. Others at vantage points called out. ‘A train like ours,’ I shouted. ‘The windows are not covered. There are people in it.’ Our train halted. The other was already stationary. ‘Women. Women. There are women in it. And children.’ I don’t know if it was my voice telling the news or some of the others. I think we were yelling against each other. There was pandemonium. The men in the middle surged towards the outside and we look-outs were pressed flat against the woodwork. We hardly noticed the additional discomfort. The women looked startled. They could see nothing but the big blank sides of the trucks. The noise from our train became a swelling roar. Someone screamed, ‘They

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