SOLOVETSKI MONASTERY *Frontispiece.*

(From a photograph by kind permission of Major H. A. Penn.)

RED GAOLS

A Woman's Experiences in Russian Prisons

Translated from the French by O.B.
With kind permission of the Editions du Cerf, Juvisy

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PREFACE

TO write a foreword to this little book is a painful undertaking. As we read the shameful record of wanton brutality and crime we ask ourselves, not whether it can be true, for it bears its own evidence of truthfulness upon it, but whether any useful purpose can be served by its publication. Our answer is that so much has been boldly written on the other side, so much to conceal the crude facts beneath a specious surface, that there seems to be no other course but to let the truth be told in all its naked simplicity. We have here a narrative drawn from actual experience, written for no other purpose than that the truth may be known, by one who has endured the torture for eight years, and has still preserved her sanity and reason. The injustice has not warped her judgement ; she shows no bitterness or hysteria ; she confines herself to just those things which she saw and went through, permitting herself no word of recrimination or needless abuse. Who is responsible for these

abominations she does not say ; she tells of them, not that their perpetrators may be punished, but that they may be brought to an end.

And for this same reason they are published. Politics do not concern us ; even Bolshevism, its rights or its wrongs, is outside our range ; we would only say that the tale here told is true, and if Bolshevism is what it claims to be, humanitarian, then it will not merely hide the truth by cheap denial, but will set itself to clean the foul cesspool which makes it stink in the nostrils of men, even of those who might otherwise be tempted to give it a sympathetic hearing.

✠ Alban Goodier, S.J.

FOREWORD

to the French Edition

THIS record is written by a cultured woman with an inside knowledge of the U.S.S.R. where she has lived and suffered, and also worked in various Government offices. Therefore it deserves to be read with particular attention.

At the present time, when astute propaganda efforts aim at conveying the impression that there is no religious persecution in Soviet Russia, and that freedom of conscience is not violated, this moving narrative, stamped with the hall-mark of truth, provides a devastating answer.

Let it be added that the writer is personally known to us, and that we are prepared to vouch for her absolute good faith.

May these pages enlighten sincere minds in danger of being misled by a campaign of lies.

Fr. C. DUMONT, O.P.

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CHAPTER I

ARREST

Soviet Government ' round up ' many Catholics.

I SPENT over eight years in Soviet gaols as a political prisoner, and personal experience entitles me to speak of those prisons and the regime inflicted upon hundreds of thousands of people whose innocence is incontestable, even from the viewpoint of a revolutionary court.

I was arrested on November 14, 1923, in my home, after a lengthy, meticulous, but fruitless search. I was allowed to carry away what was strictly necessary, a change of underwear, soap, comb, etc. Soldiers led me out of my little flat which I was never to see again. All my belongings, furniture, books, etc., vanished, and henceforth my slogan became : *omnia mea mecum porto.*

The same night saw mass arrests of Catholics

in Petrograd and Moscow. Later I heard that this was the Soviet Government's reply to an Encyclical of the Holy Father and a threatening note of Lord Curzon, though at the time nothing had been said of this. A few days later, when I was subjected to a kind of interrogation, the only question asked was : ' Where had I hidden the letters written me by the Pope ? ' For it was believed that I was an emissary of Rome and carried on a private correspondence with the Holy Father himself.

The Catholics were generally accused of offending against Article 61 of the Soviet Criminal Code which reads : ' Active participation in an organization, the aim of which is to support the international *bourgeoisie* in its struggle against the Soviet power.' (Since the modification of the Criminal Code in 1927 this article has become paragraph 4 of Article 58 which comprises all ' political crimes.') When some of the accused persons asked which criminal organization they had been associated with, they were told that the mere fact of recognizing the Pope as Head of the Church was sufficient to prove them guilty of transactions with the ' foreign *bourgeoisie*.'

CHAPTER II

MOSCOW PRISONS

From Petrograd to Moscow. The women's prison From Loubianka to Boutyrskaya.

I WAS first kept in a cell in the St. Petersburg prison 'of preliminary detention,' and a month later transferred to Moscow for a trial which never took place. I travelled with six other Catholics, two of whom were Uniate priests, and three women. We, the four women, were separated from the men and put into a special compartment with eleven other women, all prostitutes, rounded up by the police in a raid upon some disreputable den.

In the compartment into which we were packed the behaviour of the women and the soldiers defies description. The chief of the escort, unable to prevent these scenes, took pity upon us and transferred us to the men's compartment, where we found our three companions in company with ordinary criminals. Thus we proceeded on a journey which,

instead of taking a few hours, lasted three days, for cars carrying prisoners are attached to very slow goods trains.

In Moscow we were finally separated from the men and sent together with our eleven companions to the women's prison (Novinskaya) at the farther end of the town. I begged the chief of the escort to spare one of my companions, a Polish nun, this long tramp, as she was recuperating from a grave internal operation. Brutally, he retorted: 'When you commit crimes, you may walk!' So all four of us marched together with the wretched women who sang filthy songs and called out to the passers-by. A group of their hooligan friends followed, shouting insults and gibing at us.

Some celebration was going on that day in the women's prison, and the prisoners were free to 'enjoy' themselves. Some seventy or eighty dishevelled women, stark naked, their bodies tattooed all over, were running races along the passage. This witches' sabbath took place before the 'political' cell where we found an old prioress of a Moscow convent and a young girl of good family about seventeen years of age. The poor child nestled closely against the old nun who covered her with her

shawl, so that she should neither see nor hear. . . . I remained in that gaol, a most abominable place of ill-fame, only two or three days. Then I was again marched off on foot through the town by two soldiers armed to the teeth, who led me to the so-called ' interior ' prison of the G.P.U.—the sinister Loubianka No. 2. There I was locked up in a cell on the third floor.

About a fortnight later I appeared for interrogation before a member of the G.P.U. After a few questions regarding my past, my parentage, the official said I was too learned to believe in God, declaring that my devotion to the Church could only be due to political reasons. I answered that people far more learned than myself had believed and did believe in God. He asked me how I could reconcile religion with science, and started a lengthy philosophical discussion with me upon the proofs of the existence of God that lasted over an hour, when he concluded by saying I was a strong controversialist and that he was anxious to continue the discussion some other day. I then asked him what crime was imputed to me, since no Soviet law forbade belief in God and loyalty to the Church. He answered : ' We'll talk that over another time,' and ordered

me back to my cell. This was the only interrogation I was ever subjected to; no other questions were asked and it was even considered useless to formulate any accusation against me. This interview was the only one to break the monotony of life in the cell of the 'interior prison.'

The windows of all the cells of this particular prison overlooked inward courts, and though barred, they were half-closed by a kind of shutters, so that only a small patch of sky was visible. No noise from outside broke a silence of death. The floor of the passage into which the cells open was covered with thick felt, the gaolers wearing soft felt boots so that their footsteps were not heard. Loud talk was strictly forbidden; if one had to speak to the gaolers, it was only in a hurried whisper through a small opening in the door. This opening also allowed the gaolers to watch the prisoner's every movement. At fixed hours they opened another small window, cut in the door beneath the other, and silently handed in the prisoner's daily rations. In my time these rations were as follows: in the morning, seven ounces of rye bread and a bowl of hot water slightly tinged with tea, also two pieces of sugar and fifteen cigarettes (as dope); at

noon, a bowl of soup and another of porridge ; at night, again a bowl of porridge and tea without sugar. I was told that later the quality of the food deteriorated, but in my time it was incomparably superior to the rations of all other Soviet prisons. At 6 a.m. and 6 p.m. I was taken for five minutes to the lavatory. The gaoler opened the door in the presence of two soldiers, one of whom escorted the prisoner to the lavatory and stood outside, watching him. Once a month prisoners were led to the bath in the basement, but as a sentinel was on guard there, I refused to go.

Many prisoners could not endure this deathly silence : occasionally hysterical screams were heard, immediately hushed, I know not by what methods. For my part I preferred this silence and solitude to the hideous promiscuity of the women's prison.

The most horrible part was the fortnightly search, to satisfy the authorities that the prisoners hid no ' arms,' or no bit of pencil, scrap of paper, needle, money or devotional objects, cross, image, rosary and so forth. Such searches were abominably thorough, despite the utter impossibility of any prisoner obtaining anything in that well-sealed tomb where no human face was ever seen. My rosary was con-

fiscated ; I made another with a piece of string ; this was also taken ; I made a second, a third, a fourth, which all met with the same fate.

Lastly I succeeded in preserving the fifth by keeping it in my mouth whilst I was being searched. . . . I treasure it still.

But there was no occupation whatever besides this secret manufacture of rosaries, nothing to do but to pace the few steps from wall to wall, then lie down again. No books, no paper ! In order not to lose the sense of time, I scratched a line with the teeth of my comb on the wall in a dark corner, so that in counting the days I could calculate the dates.

This lasted about six months (winter 1923-24). Then early in May I was transferred to the Boutyrskaya prison where I found some fifteen ladies preparing for deportation. One was accused of illicit trading, because she had sold a dress in order to buy bread. Another had tried to earn her own and her daughter's living by baking patties which she sold in the street, a crime of ' speculation.' Two young girls were accused of ' espionage ' because they had danced at a party given by the British Consul. Others were accused of ' relations with foreign countries ' because they had received letters from *émigré* relatives.

All these 'criminals' were awaiting their fate in the company of half a dozen thieves and prostitutes. As for myself I was given to read my sentence in three lines copied out from the official report of the G.P.U. I was declared guilty of 'active participation in a counter-revolutionary organization' and by virtue of Article 61 of the Code condemned to a ten years' term of imprisonment. . . . Two days later I was led away with a group of prisoners leaving for Siberia.

CHAPTER III

JOURNEY BY 'STAGES'

Wayside prisons. Prisoners' railway-cars. Searches. Arrival at Irkutsk.

IT is almost impossible to convey any idea of the prisoners' journey 'by stages.' These 'stages' are the changes of escort at intermediate stations. Thus between Moscow and Irkutsk, my ultimate destination, there were five stages (Ekaterinburg, Tyumen, Omsk, Novosibirsk, and Krasnoyarsk). In each of these places the prisoners were marched off to the local prison, there to await the new escort which was to convey them to the next station. Such halts lasted on the average from ten to fifteen days, during which time prisoners were kept huddled together in some cellar, for all gaols were full to overflowing. The Government allowed eleven copecks (approximately 2½d. at the pre-war rate of exchange) per head per day for the prisoners' rations, and even this absurdly

inadequate sum seldom reached them ; they were usually given the left-offs of the resident prisoners . . . if any were available.

The filth, vermin, promiscuous association with the very dregs of the population were far more painful to bear than hunger. We were never segregated from common malefactors, and it was with the kind of women already mentioned that we remained closely packed together, sometimes forty or fifty in a space of some thirty to forty square yards. The only furnishings were *nary*, a kind of shelf running the length of the walls at a height of about a yard or so from the ground. In theory each prisoner was entitled to a space equal to the width of three planks, but the number of prisoners being ten times greater than the accommodation provided, people lay in a heap on these shelves, without consideration for either space or air. We had to lie on our sides as closely pressed one against the other as possible ; when no free space was available, prisoners had to stand or crouch beneath the *nary*. Such was always the case with the latest arrivals, who had to wait their turn for the minimum of space, when the new-comer would be tightly wedged in, to the verge of suffocation, between two other women infested with

RAILWAY CAR ADAPTED FOR TRANSPORT OF PRISONERS
(FROM A SKETCH BY THE AUTHOR)

vermin, and often suffering from some foul disease.

The cars in which the prisoners were conveyed deserve special mention. They were ordinary third-class carriages, but the partition which separated the compartments from the passage had been removed and replaced by a long grating, so that each compartment was converted into a cage. Sentinels stood on guard in the passage and kept constant watch. In each cage the benches were joined together to form *nary*—there being three storeys of such *nary*. Thus every cage was divided into three sections, one above the other, where prisoners could either lie flat or crouch with their legs stretched out and the body bent, because the ceiling was too low to permit of any other posture. There were six prisoners to each deck; the space was so limited that all were packed like sardines, each cage contained eighteen people with about half a yard of free space between every row of six. It is needless to say that the air very soon became stifling, the prisoners being scarcely able to breathe, or to stretch their numbed limbs. It was under such conditions that an uninterrupted journey of several days was made, for the distance between the *stations* is never less than two

or three days' travel, sometimes five or six.

When the next *station* was reached the prisoners, more dead than alive, were detrained and lined up in a column, four abreast, and, loaded with any belongings they might have, marched off to the local prison. Such marches were sometimes terrible because of the utter exhaustion of the prisoners. For instance, at Omsk the prison is some nine miles distant from the railway station, and on the day of our arrival the heat was intense—in July the sun beats fiercely upon the steppes of Central Asia. We had to cross the town and walk some three or four miles more in the open steppe. Two carts followed us, carrying part of the luggage with five or six persons who were too weak to walk, the others—more than four hundred people of both sexes—marched, carrying their things, which many threw away, having no strength left to carry them. There were cases of sunstroke, and two old men died. . . .

To these sufferings must be added those of ceaseless searches. At every *station* prisoners were subjected to four searches: (1) by the escort before they entered the prison, (2) by the guards before they were admitted into it, (3) by the same guards before they left the

prison, and (4) by the new escort when it received the prisoners. The searches took place in the open. Parcels were undone on the ground, in the mud, in the rain or snow—underwear and miserable rags mercilessly crumpled and soiled had to be picked up in a hurry under the insults and blows of the soldiers, who were impatient to start the prisoners on their painful tramp towards the prison or the trains.

Again I repeat, it is impossible to give a detailed description of such a journey 'by stages,' for it would sound too incredible a nightmare. Suffice it to say that those who have experienced it consider it a worse torture than detention in the most awful prison : I am still astonished that I survived it.

My journey lasted nearly four months : I left Moscow early in May and reached Irkutsk at the end of August. On the journey I often changed my fellow-prisoners at different *stations*. We parted ways with those whose destination was other than ours, or we picked up others ; on the average the number of prisoners was approximately four hundred. Subsequently I had the opportunity of seeing figures which showed that from fifty to sixty thousand prisoners passed every summer

through the central Siberian *station* (Novo-sibirsk) ; sometimes the figure reached one hundred thousand. In the winter deportations are not as numerous because too many prisoners had frozen to death. I heard that one winter the death-rate attained sixty per cent.

CHAPTER IV

IRKUTSK

The women's prison. In the cells. Expectation of death. Scurvy. Departure for Solovki.

THE Irkutsk prison, built under the old régime, is a large and rather well-proportioned building, but it was constructed to house one thousand prisoners, whereas now the average is never beneath five thousand and often much in excess of this figure. Because of this the women have been transferred outside the main prison building into four small houses surrounded by a strong palisade—in former times it was the prison hospital, some two hundred yards from the main building.

There I spent the first months of my term in a small separate cell. Another cell was occupied by two other victims of anti-Catholic persecution. The other women, from three to six hundred, were ordinary criminals; many were professionals, members of some of the brigand bands which terrorized Siberia. One of these

termagants confessed twenty-seven murders and laughingly boasted of her exploits.

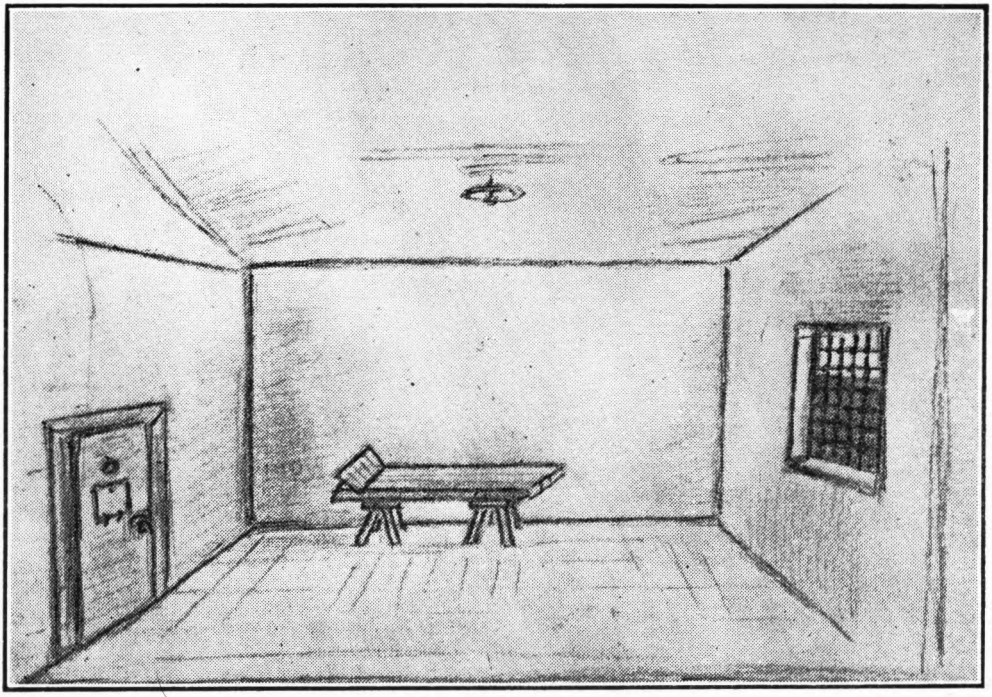
The bulk of them were thieves and frequenters of the lowest dens of vice. They spent some months in prison, and were released only to return in a few weeks, when the police again rounded up hooligans and their companions. Often they fought, tore each other's hair, or scratched each other's eyes out. Twice I witnessed assassinations: in one case about a score of infuriated harpies, armed with bricks, battered the head of their victim into a jelly. One day there was a general fight among fifty women—the gaolers dared not enter the room, soldiers and firemen were summoned, and the water-hose turned upon them. The battle stopped only when the women were up to their knees in water; some of the wounded had been literally scalped, their hair torn off with the skin of their head.

It was heart-breaking to see children in those abominable surroundings: there were always some fifty mites the mothers had brought into prison, not only babies but older children up to ten years, who saw and heard all the filth, and who were taught obscenity. No interference was possible. In Omsk I was threatened with the black hole because I had tried

to protest against the perversion of children, a little boy and girl of four whom those wretches were marrying. . . . I cried out in horror, demanded the manager, the prison doctor. Nobody came, and to get rid of me the gaolers led me to the dark hole, but it was too crowded to admit me. In Irkutsk the women were in such a frenzy that it was useless to protest, so I could only seek refuge in my little cell—three yards square—where at least I did not see those abominations ; unfortunately I overheard everything.

In these small houses there were no arrangements for the most elementary human needs. The kitchen where we had to go for our rations, the well where we had to draw water, the lavatory, were all at different ends of the enclosure. This was torture in the winter, when during two or three months the thermometer showed 67 degrees F. below freezing point and 112 degrees F. below freezing point during the second half of January. The food never varied : it was sour cabbage boiled in much water, buckwheat porridge also boiled in water, and ten ounces of black bread.

When we reached Irkutsk I was made to work in the office. All the women worked in a tobacco factory belonging to and adjoining the



INTERIOR OF A PRISON CELL AT IRKUTSK (FROM A SKETCH BY THE AUTHOR)

prison. I worked upon statistics, but that did not last long because a circular of the Public Prosecutor for Siberia forbade any kind of work to political prisoners. This meant a stricter régime, for work was slightly remunerated, and allowed of some extras beyond the ordinary régime. The 'politicals' were deprived of all this, and soon a new circular ordered them to be placed in the strictest confinement. So I was transferred from my cell in the women's section to one in the men's prison.

This was a large and substantial three-storeyed building—surrounded by a small courtyard, around which ran a very high wall. The régime was modelled upon that of the Moscow G.P.U. prison, but softened by gaolers not so well drilled as their Moscow comrades; and their loyalty to the Soviet Government was lukewarm. They chatted freely with us, expressing views diametrically opposed to such as one would expect them to hold. Prisoners were entitled to daily exercise of half an hour, or an hour, taken in the small court by groups of ten to fifteen. We were not allowed to speak to each other, though here again our gaolers broke the rule and winked at our secret intercourse.

The cell in which I was interned for over three years, was some ten yards square, had an iron couch, an iron stool fixed to the wall near an iron ledge which did duty as table. The door was also of iron, with the inevitable little window and the opening below to pass the food. There was one window, to the grating of which I would cling for hours at a time, looking out at the vast spaces stretching away beyond the town.

My cell was on the third floor where the 'important,' i.e. political prisoners, were kept. On the second were the 'politicals' whose cases were being examined, whilst on the ground floor lived turbulent prisoners, too dangerous to be kept in common cells, and especially those under sentence of death. This section was never empty: there were always scores of condemned who were called for about midnight, and taken to the G.P.U. where sentences were carried out. Sometimes one or two were taken, sometimes entire groups.

On every floor every night prisoners strained their ears to hear the familiar sound of opening doors, the tramp of the G.P.U. guards, then screams, prayers or curses of the condemned, occasionally the sound of a desperate struggle. Then the doors were slammed, the keys were

turned in the locks, and everything was silent again until the following night. Once fifty-two prisoners were led away, six of them were women, two of whom carried small babies in their arms. The next day I asked the gaolers what had happened to the babies. 'The mothers took them.' 'And then?' They shrugged their shoulders. . . .

Here I must note a characteristic feature of Red Russia and her prisons. One evening in August, 1926, they called for me and two other 'political' women and led us to the prison office where we found all the twenty-nine 'political' men interned in our prison at the time. A G.P.U. escort was awaiting us with all ceremonial usual when prisoners were led to execution. Two gaolers who felt kindly towards me, bade me farewell and furtively kissed my hand. When I asked the governor of the prison whether we were to be shot, he hesitated and then replied in the affirmative.

So we went, firmly convinced we were going to our death. We crossed the town and reached the G.P.U. about midnight. There we were locked up, the two women and myself in a tiny room, whilst all the twenty-nine men were given a slightly larger one. After that complete silence reigned, and each of us prepared

for death in his or her own way. The night passed, and nobody came to fetch us.

The next day a soldier brought us a bowl of soup and three spoons, saying that, though we were not on the list of rations, in the meanwhile we would be given the soldiers' soup. Apparently the execution was fixed for the next night, but again it passed without anything occurring to break the deep silence. This suspense lasted a week. On the *ninth* day one woman, myself, and seventeen men were called, and without any explanation whatever brought back to our prison. A week later the others, whom we believed to have been shot, joined us. . . . Two of the men were on the verge of insanity.

Soon we learnt the reason of the strange and sinister joke. *All the 'politicals' had to be removed because a delegation of German workmen was awaited in Irkutsk: after visiting Moscow they were being shown round Siberia.* They were to view some places of detention with the usual staging to prove that these places were an earthly paradise. Now the 'politicals' might have given the show away, smuggled a note, or spoken, for nearly all had some knowledge of foreign languages; so not only were they hidden everywhere, but the G.P.U. distrusted even the prison administration, which might

have warned the prisoners, or transmitted some secret note. Therefore to forestall such an eventuality the G.P.U. spread the rumour that secret orders had been received for the execution of all ' politicals,' and thus succeeded in deceiving the Governor of the prison. So you see the game was double : we were made to believe in an execution being mysteriously postponed during eight days, whilst the dear German comrades, visiting the Irkutsk gaol, were able to admire a club, arranged *ad hoc*, with books, games of chess, musical instruments, and so forth, and a fine, clean room with excellent beds where some ' prisoners,' spotlessly clean and well dressed, told them how happy they were to be so comfortably billeted and kindly cared for. Doubtless those German comrades were much edified.

Early in 1927 I contracted scurvy, I grew steadily worse, and towards the end of the year was thought to be dying. This surprised no one for scurvy was ravaging the prison. Nevertheless, the chief of the local G.P.U. was informed about my condition and visited me. I have never been able to understand why that man, contrary to the behaviour of all his colleagues, did his utmost to ease my condition. Maybe in old days when I worked on many

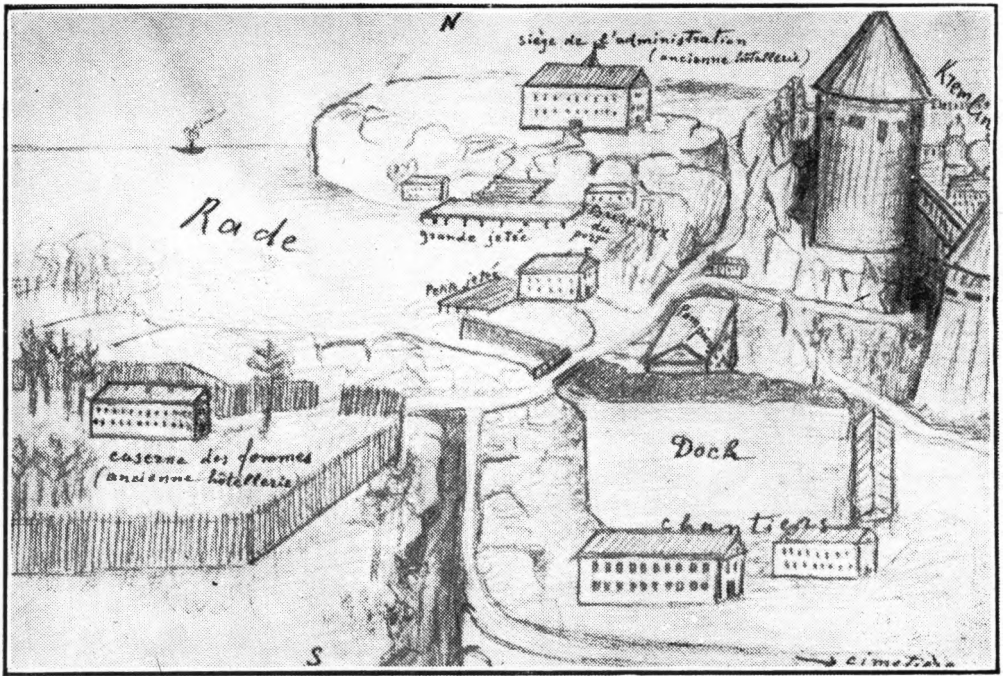
charities I may have helped some of his friends? He never said so, but sent me drugs and necessary food, for which he must have paid himself; so henceforth I received enough food and even milk.

My cell was well heated, I was allowed out in the courtyard when it became warmer, not for one hour only, but for several. I was even given books and paper. So I returned to life and recovered my strength and in the spring was told that I was to be sent to Solovki. In order to relieve the congestion of the prisons, the Government decided to concentrate all 'politicals' in special camps, with the exception of the least important who had nearly served their term. The others were transferred to the various concentration camps (*Kontzlager*) established all over Russia. My destination was Solovki, and in May, 1928, I was sent there.

Again I travelled 'by stages,' only now the chief of the Irkutsk G.P.U., who decidedly felt some kind of sympathy for me, ordered that I should travel with a group of men without any other women. This not only spared me the hideous proximity of those creatures, but also entitled me to a separate 'cage' in the carriage and the possibility of breathing a less

stifling air, at least in the beginning, for as we progressed, the carriage became as densely crowded as usual.

The journey was even longer than the first, because from Yekaterinburg we took a round-about way through Kazan, Moscow and Leningrad, as prisons on the Northern way, especially at Perm, were so full that not a shed, not a cellar, were available for us. Again I saw the Boutyrskaya at Moscow, then the large Petersburg prison (Vyborgskaya Storona) so familiar to me in old days when I visited it as member of the ' Committee of lady-patronesses of the prisons.' It was strange to be there again as a prisoner, and under what conditions ! I pictured to myself the horror of my former colleagues of the 'Ladies Committee' if they could have only glimpsed the actual state of the prison to which we had given so much care, and especially the incredible brutality which replaced our former efforts to promote the moral regeneration of the inmates. Having left Irkutsk early in May, I reached Kem on the White Sea early in September. There I stayed two or three days in an awful hut with two storeys of *nary* as overcrowded as those in the cars. Then with a large group of prisoners I was put aboard a boat bound for the Isle of



SKETCH OF THE SOLOVETSKI PRISON CAMP, MADE BY THE AUTHOR

Solovki. When the weather is good this passage takes four to five hours, but even in fine weather the sea is rough and the journey is very hard for prisoners densely packed in the hold.

CHAPTER V

SOLOVKI (I)

Organization and régime of the camp. An annexe of Hell. 'Sekirka.' Sale of prisoners. The lot of the clergy.

SOLOVKI is a large island (approximately forty miles long by twenty-five wide); it is surrounded by a group of small islands upon which lesser 'camps' for some few hundred prisoners have been established.

Anzer, the largest of these, has two or three thousand, but the bulk of prisoners are concentrated upon the main isle, 'the great Isle of Solovki' where the camp occupies the former Solovetski monastery (built in the fifteenth century). In its heyday the monastery harboured about one thousand monks and 'voluntary workers' (*trudniki*, pious pilgrims who offered their services freely for a certain period in fulfilment of a vow). At present the average number of prisoners is fifteen thousand, sometimes considerably more, exceeding twenty

thousand even. That is to say we had no free space to spare.

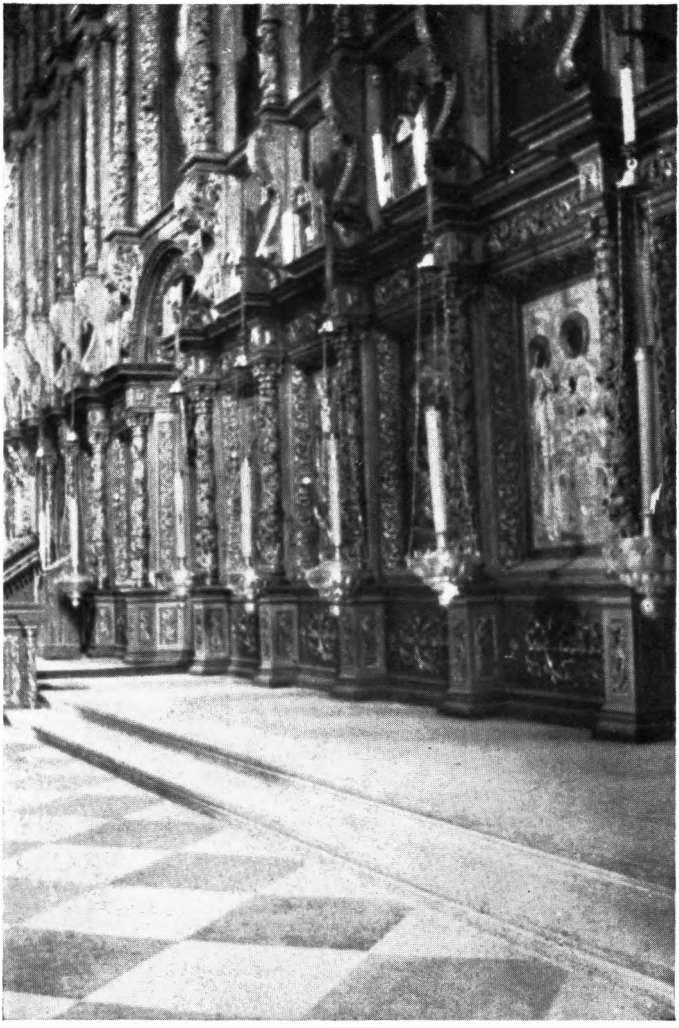
The main buildings of the old monastery were encircled by a huge stone wall, for it had also been a fortress which stood two long sieges. This fortress, ' the Kremlin,' forms the principal part of the prison camp ; all the buildings and numerous churches and chapels have been converted into barracks with two or three storeys of *nary*. Outside the Kremlin, around the small bay, were the hostels for pilgrims ; the largest of them is now the headquarters of the island administration, whilst another is a barrack for female prisoners.

Beyond this small and over-populated centre the rest of the island is practically uncultivated and is covered with forests where in former days hermitages were scattered about. Around the coast were a number of small fisheries. All these places are now sections of the camp, where some hundreds of prisoners are engaged upon various labours. The monks had made good roads through the forests in order to connect these different spots with the Kremlin. Now the prisoners are responsible for the upkeep of these roads, but their main work is the exploitation of forests. As to the fisheries, which are one of the sources of income, the ' politicals '

are not employed there for fear of their escaping, since the only way for flight is by sea, if a boat can be had. So all boats are watched with particular vigilance, and fishermen are enlisted only from the ranks of ordinary malefactors who have gained the trust of the G.P.U.

The same category of criminals is employed as gaolers and military guards on the island. The only regular unit of G.P.U. soldiers occupies the most important posts; as to the others, they are common murderers with a short military training, and drilled to supervise the other prisoners, especially the 'politicals.' They are armed and wear a uniform like the Red Guards. Needless to say that in order to demonstrate their zeal and obtain reward, especially the reduction of their term, they compete in brutality towards the prisoners.

That no attempt should be made to bribe the gaolers and also to make all communication with the outer world impossible, the prisoners are forbidden to have any money, nothing in fact except their clothes. The only currency in the camps are special notes issued by the G.P.U. of the same value as the notes and coins current in Russia, but valid only in the area of that particular camp. Thus, for instance, if a prisoner receives money from his



SOLOVETSKI MONASTERY

Part of the Cathedral before its conversion into a barrack for male prisoners

(*From a photograph by kind permission of Major H. A. Penn.*)

family or from any other sources, the sum is paid out to him in these G.P.U. notes, and he may spend them only in the camp stores. In these stores the choice of goods accessible to prisoners is exceedingly limited : if any tempting food, good stuffs, etc., are displayed, they are reserved for the ' chiefs ' only and are not for prisoners.

When I reached Solovki in 1928 prisoners were given a few roubles per month, according to their ' category of work,' to buy food—this was all the care the ' chiefs ' took of them. But the following year remuneration in money was abolished, and fixed rations were then issued to prisoners at the canteen. For the vast majority who, like myself, received no remittances from outside, this order spelt starvation. The camp rations were the same as in the prisons, buckwheat porridge, sour cabbage in water, occasionally salted fish or pickled horseflesh.

The penal régime is run on strictly military lines. Prisoners are grouped in units, commanded by a chief, himself a prisoner enjoying special confidence, usually a G.P.U. agent or a Communist sent to Solovki for a misdeed so serious as to demand punishment. The appointment to such posts gives them the opportunity

for rehabilitation, therefore they are full of zeal, and terrorize and bully their victims : especially do they excel in a system of secret supervision and denunciation which allows them to observe the prisoners' every movement.

Twice a day there was a roll call of the prisoners of every unit, and immediately after the morning call, squads were formed for the daily work. Most of the men toiled in the forests, a labour which was very arduous and exacted numerous casualties. The task allotted is beyond the capacity of men who have never felled timber, yet it had to be fulfilled even if it entailed working throughout the night. Old and sick men begged to be exempted from the awful work—they were beaten with rifle-butts and made to march, and at night their corpses were brought back.

The horror was increased by the lack of warm clothing : until 1931 no clothes were given to replace the prisoners' own clothing, which was falling into rags. Wretched men arrested in the summer, reached their destination in the midst of an arctic winter and were sent to work up to their knees in snow in their thin summer clothing. To avoid the work, prisoners often mutilated themselves by cutting off their fingers. This was severely punished ;

then when self-mutilation increased, it was declared that this would be considered as ' refusal to obey,' consequently punishable by the death penalty, which many suffered.

There were also less direct punishments. I recollect a case when one man cut off his fingers—he was strapped to the felled tree left on the road, some ten miles away from the camp, and ordered to return home dragging the tree. He succeeded in dragging it a few miles, and expired on the way. I also recall a young poet, exiled to Solovki because of a disrespectful couplet. His shoes were falling to pieces ; in vain he begged for any pair of boots to wear in the forests : no answer was given. He chopped off the thumb and first finger of his left hand, put them into an envelope addressed to the G.P.U. thus : ' I send this choice morsel to you who are devilishly fond of human flesh. . . .'

All this was going on at the very moment when the Soviet Government, in reply to the U.S.A. Government which prohibited the importation of Soviet timber worked by forced labour, declared that its production of timber had never borne the aspect of forced labour ! Accustomed to the constant lies which are the very basis of the Soviet régime, we were never-

theless astounded in Solovki, as well as in all other Northern camps, when we read that incredibly impudent assertion of Commissar Molotov. He dared to deny that there was forced labour in the forests, whereas from the White Sea to the Urals *hundreds of thousands of miserable creatures were losing their health and their lives at that terrible labour !*

I have said that a refusal to obey incurred the death penalty. There were different penalties for other delinquencies. A prisoner might be locked up in an icy cell where he was given a bowl of soup *every two days* and where he was not allowed to have a blanket or overcoat ; and yet this was not the worst torture. In the summer when the forests are infested with a plague of mosquitoes, a man would be stripped naked, tied to a tree for a few hours, and left to the mercy of these pests. Or in the autumn when the temperature of the sea is about freezing point, a man would be kept up to his neck in the water for fifteen minutes, or more. . . .

The chiefs of the camp would sentence a man to two or three weeks of *Sekirka*. This was the torture of immobility : the prisoners sat on benches, their hands spread on their knees, forbidden to move. Every two or three hours they would be made to walk round and then to

sit again. In the night the men had to lie still, closely pressed together, and every two hours at a given order they turned simultaneously on the other side. . . . Some went insane, and in a paroxysm of despair attacked their guards : then they would be shot.

All this may sound incredible, yet it will be confirmed by those who at the time had personal experience of the ' isle of suffering ' as Solovki is known now in Russia.

However, a few hundred prisoners amongst the fifteen thousand lived under better conditions. These were in most cases former Communists who, as I have stated, were given responsible posts, and specialists—doctors, engineers, etc., and such prisoners as were employed in the offices of the administration. The very nature of their employment precluded work by squads ; they could move about the camp with greater freedom and, as their services were needed, they enjoyed a privileged status. Yet this privileged position was subject to qualification, for, like all the rest, they remained slaves who could, when expedient, be sold.

This is no exaggeration : specialists were often *sold* to some regional administration, the sale being specified in a deed stating to what

use the particular specialist would be put, the cost of his upkeep, and so forth. His salary was fixed according to the regional rate of tariff and was to be paid into the G.P.U. cash office. The purchaser was responsible for his slave, for his work as well as his behaviour, which meant that he would not attempt to escape. If his work proved unsatisfactory, the prisoner was to be returned to Solovki. All this was arranged in the same way as live-stock would be disposed of, and yet the slaves themselves would hail such a sale with glee, for it was tantamount to a departure from the 'isle of damnation.' How often we heard some chemical or railway engineer declare joyfully: 'I am leaving . . . have been sold to Archangel (or somewhere else), what luck!'

Other classes of privileged deserve less sympathy: such were the former Communists, and especially the miserable people anxious to curry favour with the authorities by spying upon their fellow-sufferers. As all over Russia, in Solovki the system of espionage and denunciation was admirably organized. There was at least one spy for every room and in every section of work. Despite the 'secret collaborator's' efforts to remain undetected, he was easily found out because of the privileges he was

given ; but for fear of the terrible reprisals by which those spies were protected, he suffered no harm, and the abominable system flourished, poisoning the air, already foul enough, of the 'isle of damnation.' The system was also used to undermine the 'bad influence' (from the authorities' viewpoint) which some prisoner might exercise upon his fellows, a religious influence being dreaded above everything. So in such cases it would be insinuated that the 'undesirable' prisoner in question was actually a secret agent, and the simple-minded would be deceived.

Yet in this inferno of suffering and lies the men had a great advantage over the women, for they were divided into well-defined groups. Specialists, employees of different offices were billeted apart, and inevitably their régime underwent certain modifications. Priests were completely segregated, and from 1928 they formed a separate colony on the Isle of Anzer, and within the boundary of this small separate camp they enjoyed relative freedom. This was done to prevent them from exercising any influence over the other prisoners, and also to keep them in ignorance of the doings on the main island.

It was known that Europe took an interest

in the priests and that sooner or later they would have to be released and go free, so every measure was taken that they should not mix with other prisoners and share the common regime. Only very seldom and secretly was it possible to get into touch with them. The few Orthodox priests who were not interned with the others in Anzer, were subjected to the general prison régime. Thus Mgr Zhizhilenko, Bishop of Voronezh, and at one time a doctor, had to work in the local hospital, and in 1930 was shot because he was seen administering the Last Sacrament to a dying man, a thing most strictly forbidden.

CHAPTER VI

SOLOVKI (II)

The women's gaol. Promiscuity and debauchery. The roll-call. Mass execution. Distribution of labour.

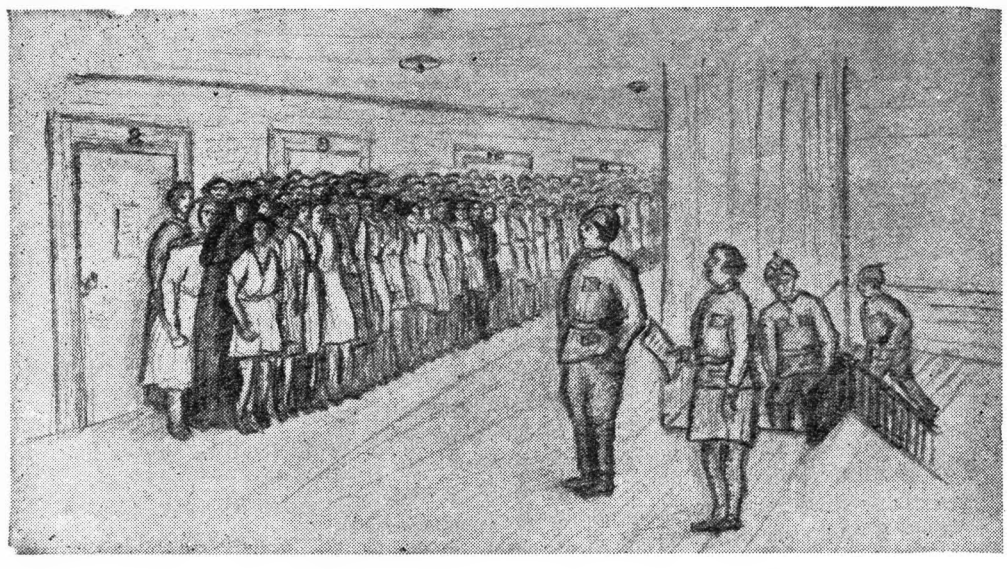
IN the women's quarters no segregation into groups was admitted, and the promiscuity described elsewhere existed here also in all its loathsomeness. It was worse even because prisoners enjoyed a certain freedom of movement within the enclosure of the camp, and the men, who numbered fifteen to one woman, circled around women like hungry wolves. The example was set by the camp officials, who exercised the rights of feudal lords over their female vassals. The fate of young girls and nuns recalled the times when under the pagan Cæsars Christian virgins were confined in dens of vice as a species of torture.

The women's battalion (for we, too, were militarized, and formed a battalion) was billeted in an ancient hostel outside the Kremlin walls, a dilapidated timber house in so ad-

vanced a state of decay that no *nary* could be installed for fear lest the walls collapse. Each prisoner was entitled to a couch made of three boards, placed upon trestles, and as there were not enough of these primitive couches and insufficient space in which to place them, many women slept on the floor, especially in the spring and autumn when batches of new prisoners arrived.

The passage, which ran through the length of each of the two storeys, was nearly always covered with a dense mass of bodies closely squeezed together. As always, new-comers had to await their turn to obtain a couch. In the lower storey the rooms were fairly large and held some fifty couches each: they were crowded without any concern for a sufficiency of breathable air. In the upper storey some rooms held six, fifteen, or even twenty-five couches, and scarcely any space was left between them to move.

At six a.m. the first call took place for women engaged on manual work, and at eight for the so-called ' office workers.' The prisoners lined up in four rows in the passage, the woman-commander dressed the ranks, then one of the Kremlin officers arrived and shouted a military greeting to which a response had also



PARADE OF WOMEN PRISONERS AT SOLOVETSKI (FROM A SKETCH BY THE AUTHOR)

to be shouted out in unison, as was the custom in the Russian Army. Often the officer found we did not shout loud enough and forced us to shout ten or fifteen times over, or he would declare that the whole battalion was to stand to attention for half an hour or an hour as a punishment.

Another time we had military drill, marching, turning round, etc. It is impossible to imagine anything more abominably grotesque than the sight of that rigid officer in his tight uniform playing at soldiers with a lot of scared women, among whom pale and thin ladies brushed shoulders with stout bewildered peasants, and venerable old nuns with flappers in short skirts. They all had to line up, shout in unison, turn right and left, and obey the brutal orders of a boy intoxicated with power, and sometimes also with alcohol.

Besides these daily parades there were others of a more sinister kind. Once or twice a month the whole battalion would be lined up at six a.m., no exception being made even for the sick. An officer of high rank arrived and read out a long list of the prisoners who had been condemned to death and executed for a 'refusal to obey' or other delinquencies. We listened in silence, broken sometimes by a

sharp scream when some woman had heard a name dear to her. Then the official declared that these executions were an example and warning for all, and gave the order to dismiss.

Occasionally such ' examples ' were given in a particularly spectacular way. Thus in October, 1929, a mass massacre of prisoners was staged. All were ex-officers, accused of some vague plot which had been ' discovered.' The execution took place in front of our barrack. A large ditch was dug some fifty paces from the windows, and at nightfall fifty-three men, their hands tied behind their backs, were lined up in groups of five or six along the ditch. Torches and lanterns illuminated the ghastly scene; revolver shots were fired at them, and when the bodies fell into the ditch, other shots were fired into the heap, presumably to finish some wounded who may have shown signs of life ; then a squad of prisoners briskly filled up the trench.

During that time the women's barrack re-echoed with screams and hysterical cries, for many had seen a brother, husband, or lover slaughtered before their very eyes. . . . The length of the lists read to us at the morning roll call varied from fifty to one hundred and fifty names, a monthly average of about one

hundred victims, amongst whom there frequently were women.

One of the most hideous cases I remember was that of a woman who was shot because she had tried to help her husband to escape. She was not a prisoner, but had remained at home after her husband's deportation, a cripple who had lost both legs. She was allowed to visit her husband in Solovki and seized this opportunity to impart to him some plan to escape. She was arrested and shot with her husband, and our gaolers told us laughingly how ' funny it was ' when before the execution her artificial limbs were removed !

But to resume my narrative; when the horrid farce of the roll call was over, the officer gave the order to dismiss, and working squads were formed. Only in rare cases when the export of timber was particularly urgent, did women work in the forests ; then some squads were sent to cut branches, saw trunks, etc. The hardest manual work that was given to women was in the peat-bogs, where they cut the peat into bricks, transported them to a given place and piled them in heaps for drying. This work in liquid mud, without having proper footwear and clothing, was an ordeal which wrecked the women's health. In consequence so many

were on the sick list that an order was finally issued exempting women from this work : in my time they were sent to the peat-marshes only after a medical examination. This examination classed us into four categories ; the fourth was qualified to do the hardest work —peat, timber, etc.; the third was given manual work of a lighter kind, laundry, washing floors or doing housework for the officials. The second category made clothes, or the more educated worked as typists, secretaries or statisticians in the offices, or as nurses in the hospital. Finally, the first category, a very restricted one, comprised the totally disabled, but as they were useless mouths to feed, every autumn the camp was cleared of them and they would be sent to some other place of deportation.

As for myself, as soon as I reached Solovki, I was classed in the second category : scurvy had wrecked my health and I had nearly lost the use of my legs. Owing to this I was spared the most painful manual work. Every six months a new medical examination was made in order to see whether more women could not be employed at the hardest work—however, owing to the precarious state of my health, I was never transferred from the second category.

CHAPTER VII

SOLOVKI (III)

Camp hospital. A colony for the young. Politicals. Unavoidable loathsome promiscuity.

I WAS given statistical and office work, at first as accountant and librarian of the local 'museum' but I incurred the accusation of 'sabotage' because I tried to save 'museum exhibits' from profanation, and refused to give anti-religious explanations to groups of prisoners brought to hear them. I was then deported to Anzer to a special camp for the 'refractory' where conditions were particularly painful. But my illness increased so that I was brought back to Solovki, some influential prisoners having interceded on my behalf and arranged for my entry into the hospital of the main island. I was unconscious when brought there, so they decided I was dying and left me in peace.

As a matter of fact, the pharmacy having scarcely any medicaments in stock, nothing else could have been done for me. Patients were given a bowl of soup twice a day, and

only to the very weakest were seven ounces of milk issued every two days! In a room, normally intended to hold two persons, we were twenty; the next room was quite as overcrowded, and in the passage patients lay on the floor, and to reach the two rooms it was necessary to step over them. The third room was reserved for contagious diseases, but it was also so densely packed that some of the patients also lay in the passage. There were cases of every sort of disease in my room—even confinements, and women with new-born babies lay there. Needless to say that the death-rate was very high. In the morning the dead bodies would be fetched. They were stripped of all clothes, and their mouths opened and examined; if any gold teeth were found they were roughly broken out. Then the poor naked body was dragged away to a shed opposite our windows, a cart or a sledge drove up, and a score or so of corpses placed upon it and taken away to be buried in a common grave. In very rare cases did officials allow friends or relatives to take away a body and give it decent burial.

I endured this nightmare hospital for a couple of months, and then without any treatment my strong constitution pulled me

through, and as soon as I stood again on my legs, I was sent back to the women's barrack and a few days later was working upon statistics.

There were about a thousand women in Solovki ; of this total three to four hundred were distributed amongst different camps of the main island, the rest were all in our barrack. Some sixty per cent were criminals, similar to the poor creatures I have spoken of previously ; many were girls between sixteen and eighteen years old, and some younger, and they were all completely depraved. An attempt was made to form a separate colony for girls and boys of the same age. It became such a plague-spot of debauchery, however, that the officials were compelled to withdraw the girls, whilst the boys were formed into ' working-squads ' to hunt other prisoners. When these young hooligans had won distinction in their role of sleuth-hounds, they were transferred to the Bolshevo colony (near Moscow) where the G.P.U. had organized a training-school for police-agents. As to the miserable girls, too vicious to be trained as police-women, they were brought back to our barrack and shared our rooms.

Amongst the ' politicals ' who formed the

SOLOVETSKI MONASTERY

The former guest-house, now the office of the G.P.U.

(From a photograph by kind permission of Major H. A. Penn.)

remaining forty per cent of the prisoners, there were ladies and young girls condemned mostly upon some incredibly flimsy charge of 'espionage,' because of letters received from abroad, friendship with or lessons given to foreigners, and so forth. Some were relatives or friends of people who had been shot, for in 'political' cases the whole family is made responsible for the behaviour, or more exactly the frame of mind, of any of its members. We had priests' wives and professors' wives, for this was the time when the Government was wiping out the last remnants of the intellectual and professional classes. We had also many peasants, victims of enforced collectivization; mostly these were good and honest women, intercourse with whom made a restful change from our relations with the dregs of humanity.

There were also many religious; sometimes an entire community, headed by its prioress, would join us. I recall an old prioress, eighty-six years of age, who was brought over from the Caucasus where she had lived in a convent ever since her youth. The journey, made under such conditions as I have described, broke her health and she was half paralysed. They kept her in hospital for a

couple of years, then with a batch of other disabled she was deported to Siberia. I saw her carried on a stretcher to the boat, doomed to die on the way, for she was eighty-eight, paralysed, and the conditions of such journeys were scarcely bearable even for strong men.

For all of us women the régime was the same, and there was no chance of getting away from the foul promiscuity. At one time a more humane woman 'commander' allowed us to select neighbours in the room to our taste, and thus we were able to avoid sharing a couch with someone too repugnant. But this was only a short respite of two or three months: a Moscow bigwig arrived on a tour of inspection and was indignant to see 'privileged,' i.e. clean, rooms. Vainly did our 'commander' try to justify herself by saying that the office-workers who came back at half-past eleven needed rest, that there was too much noise in the other rooms. Nothing availed, the 'commander' was degraded, and the order was given to mix the women so that in every room fifty per cent of the inmates should be prostitutes, and this order was strictly obeyed.

CHAPTER VIII

SOLOVKI (IV)

Responsibility of the G.P.U. An inquiry and its consequences. Epidemic of dysentery. Plight of the women. Systematic depravity.

THE case just cited proves that the treatment suffered by decent women was officially prescribed, though when complaints did occasionally reach the Moscow G.P.U., it invariably resorted to most brazen denials, blaming everything upon the carelessness or indiscreet zeal of its subordinates. But in the given case I myself, as well as my fellow-prisoners, heard the orders thundered out by one of the heads of the Moscow G.P.U. who came to Solovki specially to inspect the camp and prisoners.

This system of shifting all responsibility upon subordinates is only too well-known. When the camp atrocities transcend all limits and it is feared that rumours of the scandals

might come to the knowledge of the Press abroad, the G.P.U. hastens to sacrifice some of its own agents.

Thus after the frightful winter of 1929-30, when more than twenty thousand prisoners died from typhus and dysentery in the White Sea camps, Moscow became uneasy and prepared punishment for the administration. A judiciary commission was dispatched to Solovki; it dismissed the whole administration of the island, and having found seventeen convicts who exercised administrative functions guilty of carelessness, condemned them to be shot. But their superiors, who were the actual culprits, underwent a mock trial, were condemned to a term of imprisonment, then swiftly transferred to another place. Their services were too valuable, and the G.P.U. could not afford to lose them. So how could we believe that the G.P.U., so perfectly informed always, remained in ignorance of a state of things which led to so appalling a mortality? It had been foreseen, for in September, when I was still in Anzer, I saw hundreds of half-clothed wretches busily digging huge trenches where corpses—the anticipated toll of death during the winter—would be buried. This work was done beforehand,

because during the winter months the earth froze so hard that no digging was possible.

It was well known that no billets were available for the ten thousand prisoners who reached Solovki in one month, that every more or less habitable shelter, was densely packed with human beings, and the miserable latest arrivals were herded in sheds in which cattle had died from exposure, in dilapidated little chapels open to all winds, or even in the same trenches which were prepared to bury them. Some heaps of straw would be thrown in, canvas stretched over to simulate a roof, and this was a shelter for human beings in the far North, close to the Arctic Circle.

Moscow knew that these people, brought in large numbers from other camps early in the winter when the temperature had fallen below freezing point, had no proper clothing, that some were half naked, stark naked even! This is no exaggeration—I have seen endless files of convicts walk past me on the snow-bound road, half of them were either bare-footed or wore *lapti* (shoes made of birch-bark), some were draped in a sack, others just girded with any old rag, whilst a certain number had not even a shred of covering upon them! It was known that the dis-

pensary was short of drugs, and that there was not enough food even for the meagre prison rations. And yet, when in two months' time the epidemic carried away three-quarters of the total number of prisoners, the Moscow G.P.U. had the effrontery to blame it all upon its subordinates and to enact the unworthy farce of a trial. These subordinates played the part of scapegoats, whereas their superiors were perfectly aware all the time of the actual condition of things which caused the death of so great a number of victims.

It is impossible to give an adequate description of such horrors as the case, for instance, when a few hundred men, suffering from dysentery, all half-naked, were confined in a chapel and lay in a heap on the icy stone floor. They were left to die, and every morning men armed with long hooks opened the door and dragged out the corpses, which the survivors clung to because they used them as mattresses on which to lie. . . . I am unable to describe the atrocities of that epidemic ; they would sound too incredible. Even if later on documents at present secret come to light, those who have not lived through such an awful nightmare will be unable to believe it.

I shall now refer again to the life of women

in the ' isle of suffering,' reiterating that it was organized in conformity with the orders from Moscow. That was why we could never succeed in obtaining any improvement in the nauseous conditions.

Though depravity was general and cynically boasted of, cases of brutal rape were relatively rare, because forbidden, within the main camp at least. More effective methods existed in order to debauch young women and more particularly nuns, who were the object of a special lust. When invincible resistance was met with, it was punished by a transfer, under any pretext, to Anzer, and then to distant small camps, always under conditions which became steadily worse.

As a last resort there were the remote little fisheries where about a dozen men worked together. They were brutes in a state of perpetual intoxication, for the terrible work in the icy water was made bearable only by alcohol which was liberally supplied. A woman was always sent there to ' keep house ' for them. If a decent woman was ordered there as a penalty, she had no other alternative than suicide, or consent, otherwise she became the defenceless plaything of drunken savages. . . . When a nun became pregnant,

or a young girl of good family joined the theatrical company, which was tantamount to a certificate of bad conduct, we were told of it with unconcealed satisfaction. . . .

Prominent island officials were entitled to choose a woman-prisoner as a 'servant,' even the privileged prisoners—former Communists—enjoyed the same right. Besides such permanent servants, who were often changed for new ones, there were the 'chars.' Every night a telephone call to the women's barrack ordered the dispatch of fifteen to twenty women to the offices 'to wash the floors.' The woman-commander walked around the rooms to make a selection, though often names had been previously given; sometimes a certain official would be sent 'samples' to choose from.

Naturally young women were the chief sufferers from this system of debauchery, but insults to modesty and womanly dignity affected us all alike. Not only had we to live with creatures human only in their outward shape, to suffer ceaselessly from contact with them, to hear their filthy talk and witness the monstrous perversity in which they indulged under our very eyes, but we ourselves were treated as their equals, physically and morally.

Thus, when it was decided to fight vermin, dirt, infectious disease, all women were subjected to the same horrible 'sanitary measures,' insulting for any who did not belong to the very dregs of society. Vainly did we ask for the opportunity of washing, we were allowed only one tap for the whole barrack, and this solitary tap was outside the corridor in an unheated passage which during nine months of the year looked like a grotto of icicles. In secret we washed in the rooms, but this was a delinquency which, if discovered, would be punished by the strictest confinement in a special cell.

Twice a month we were all taken to the wash-house; this was compulsory. We were led out under escort in a file through the whole camp, greeted by the gibes of the men, who exchanged improper jokes with our companions. This wash-house, if the dirty shed can be so called, was built for thirty persons, whereas we were sent in batches of one hundred and fifty, a crowd of bodies tattooed and bearing traces of every imaginable disease. As often as not men came in, alleging necessary repairs to the water-pipes, a mockery, for there too we had only a couple of taps! Women who tried to avoid this penalty of

'the bath' were considered to have 'refused to submit to sanitary measures.'

Another odious ordeal was the periodical medical examinations. Precise details cannot be given, suffice it to say that all decent men were shocked and sometimes attempted to protest against the treatment inflicted upon the women. We heard them say: 'I can bear this hell, but if I heard that my wife or daughter were coming, I would sooner kill them with my own hands. . . .'

It would need volumes and the calm impartiality of an historian working upon documents without any experience of the abominable nightmare to give a comprehensive idea of what Solovki and its camp actually were.

Some day that history may be written, and its readers will blush for mankind.

CHAPTER IX

THE WHITE SEA CANAL

Evacuation of the camp. Under canvas at 38 degrees below zero. Bluff which cost 300,000 human lives.

IN 1931 the question of the evacuation of Solovki was raised; it had become too costly as the expenditure, so it seemed, exceeded the returns by several million roubles. Forced labour was to be utilized on the mainland, and only a few hundred 'refractory' or particularly dangerous prisoners left on the island. This idea was eventually given up, and in the following year interminable files of prisoners journeyed again towards Solovki, and so it is going on at the present day.

But during the summer of 1931 the bulk of convicts were transferred to new camps in Karelia, along the line of the new Baltic–White Sea canal which was being constructed. First the squads of men for the heavy manual work were sent; then came the turn of various specialists, and lastly the office workers.

I left with the latter, for I was to work upon statistics.

We left at the end of September, and the crossing was very unpleasant owing to rough weather. After a halt of a few hours in Kem, we were packed into a railway car, and two days later reached our destination, Medvezhya Gora, on the north shore of Lake Onega. All along the railway-line, where the Murmansk railway adjoins the great Lake Onega, timber sheds were being hastily erected to house the offices and services of the administration : Medvezhya Gora was to be the residence of engineers and directors of the works and also of Moscow chiefs. A well-built timber house was awaiting the latter, but the mass of prisoners were camping under canvas and would continue to do so even when the thermometer showed 38 degrees below zero.

For the women there was one barrack only, a dark shed lit by a single window at one end, two rows of *nary* running the length of the walls, and one along the centre of the building. There were some four hundred odd women huddled together in the dark, shivering on the icy boards, or pressing around the little stove that was supposed to heat the huge, draughty shed.

A LUMBER CAMP IN NORTH RUSSIA

The usual conditions of repellent promiscuity were aggravated by the numbers of men who prowled around. Prostitutes, who formed three-quarters of the total number, enjoyed greater freedom than in Solovki, and ran loose about the camp, where we were confined behind barbed wire with some thirty thousand men. So at nightfall and throughout the whole night scores of those women were brought back dead-drunk and, as often their berths were above our heads, the unpleasantness we suffered may well be imagined.

The office where I worked was about half a mile from the camp and the walk there through fields sometimes up to the waist in snow was a most painful ordeal; it was particularly so when after finishing work at 11 p.m. we returned to our shed in the dark. We advanced in a file, holding on to each other and blindly groping our way; sometimes the whole group fell into a ravine full of snow. I sprained my wrist when we fell thus one night, and this accident only increased my difficulties, for no help was to be had and I had to dress it myself, while keeping the wrist motionless. This added to the difficulties of a life recalling that of a Robinson Crusoe, or of savages. We had to walk

two hundred paces or so to fetch water, and all the rest was quite as inconvenient. . . . In recognition of our overwhelming work three other office-workers and myself were granted the privilege of spending the night in our office, so when our labours for the day were over, we cleared the tables of papers, ink-stands, and all the rest, and slept upon them fully dressed. In the morning, before the arrival of our fellow-workers, we tidied the room and started work. And yet this was an incredible mark of favour which we enjoyed with gratitude, for anything was better than our foul barrack and the proximity of drunken women in the darkness and the filth.

I could say much about the construction of the famous canal, for having been employed upon the statistics of the ' planning bureau,' I became acquainted with curious data upon an enterprise which is actually only a huge and hideous farce. But this is beyond the scope of my present pamphlet, and I will just state that this bluff cost the lives of about *three hundred thousand human beings*, an appalling figure, based upon the lists of prisoners camping in the forests, devoid of any shelter, medical aid, and often of food and drinking water even ! In some places water was at a distance

of a mile or more away, in others people drank the muddy water of the marsh.

The death-rate was such that the G.P.U., despite all its diabolic energy, was scarcely able to fill the gaps in the prisoners' ranks by importations of new batches of doomed wretches. But in an estimate of the approximate numbers of victims only prisoners actually engaged upon the construction of the canal are taken into account. Yet there were others . . . objects of wholesale traffic, actually sold to the administration of the Murmansk railway and to different branches of the timber industry.

Through my hands passed secret documents, among them about half a score of deeds of sale, each for twelve hundred to two thousand men. The human cattle had to be delivered, transport free, to the stipulated stations ; the purchaser had to provide food, not inferior in quality to the food of the concentration camps, also clothing. The term of the contract was usually for one year. Lacking information upon the ultimate fate of those poor slaves, it is impossible to estimate the number of casualties among them ; we can only make a guess at innumerable poignant tragedies.

CHAPTER X

FREEDOM

MY captivity was nearing its end, for already in Solovki I became aware that my term had been shortened by two years. This is the case for all terms exceeding five years: they are subject to a progressive reduction when the prisoner has served half his term. In the case of common criminals this reduction starts from the first year and is therefore double that of the 'politicals.' Without this measure there would be no vacancies in camps or prisons.

Arrested in November 1923, my term expired in November 1931, but as no one seemed to remember the fact, I imagined that I was being given an additional term, as does happen sometimes. Great, therefore, was my surprise when I was summoned to the office and told that I was free. Later I learnt that friends had taken steps on my behalf in Moscow. This was late in January 1932.

The glass showed 47 degrees below zero, I was clad in rags and had just a few pennies in my pocket. I was obliged to ask the 'favour' of spending two or three nights more in the camp until I could discover where to stay. With great difficulty I managed to find a billet in the neighbouring village with a kind woman, and simultaneously get some work on the railway as sub-accountant for the liquidation of some store of goods. It was, of course, a temporary job only, but I had to earn something so as to pay for my ticket and leave without having a hazy idea as to where I was to go.

Thus ended my imprisonment, and freedom for me consisted in being able to discover that the whole of Russia had become one huge prison and that the lot of 'free' citizens scarcely differed from that of the innumerable convicts !

THE END

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