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OUR FAR-FLUNG CORRESPONDENTS

ON THE PRISON HIGHWAY

The gulag's silent remains.

BY IAN FRAZIER

In early March of 2005, I flew from New York to Vladivostok and met my Russian guide, Sergei Lunev, whom I'd travelled with before. Sergei, a hale fellow in his sixties, is the head of a robotics lab in St. Petersburg who guides various expeditions for the adventure and the extra cash. From Vladivostok Sergei and I flew to Irkutsk, took a train around the southern end of Lake Baikal to Ulan Ude, went partway up the lake by bus, continued to the lake's northern end in a hired car on Baikal's winter ice road for two hundred and twenty miles, caught the Baikal-Amur Mainline at the tip of the lake, rode for fifty-some hours on the train, and then hired other cars to take us farther north, to the city of Yakutsk and beyond.

On previous Siberian journeys, I had looked for prisons, without much success. This time, I was determined to find them. Sergei had never liked my search for prisons but on this trip he was resigned to it. Past Yakutsk, we travelled on prisoner-built roads, the last of which, called the Topolinskaya Highway, no longer functioned year-round. Its ingeniously engineered log bridges were falling down and the streams they spanned had to be crossed on the ice. Stalin-era prison camps, long abandoned, appeared at regular intervals along the road. The Russian word for any camp is "lager." About thirty miles from the reindeer-herder village of Topolinoe, our driver pointed to a guard tower and other structures on one side of the road. We stopped, and Sergei and I got out and waded toward them in the thigh-deep snow.

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The lager lay in a narrow valley between sparsely wooded hills. The gray, scraggly trees, which did not make it to the hills' higher slopes, grew more thickly near the lager and partly surrounded it; a few small birches had sprung up inside what had been the camp's perimeter. Their bare branches contrasted with the white of the snow on the roof of the barracks building, whose wall, set back under the eaves, was dark. In the whiteness of an open field a guard tower tilted sideways like someone putting all his weight on one leg. A ladder-like set of steps still led up to it, and two eye-like window openings added to the anthropomorphic effect. In the endless and pristine snow cover I saw no tire tracks, road ruts, abandoned oil drums, or other sign that any human had been here since the camp was left to the elements, half a century before.

At first view, the camp looked as I'd expected. There were the fence posts shaped like upside-down L's, the ink-black barbed wire, the inch-long barbs shaped like bayonets. Some of the posts leaned in one direction or another, and the barbed-wire strands drooped or fell to the ground; the fencing, and the second line of fence posts, several metres beyond, and the low, shameful barracks, with its two doors and three windows, fit exactly with the picture of a Siberian prison camp that one has in the mind. Sergei had drifted off to the left to videotape the lager from the side. I went in by the front gate, which was standing open. When I was inside the perimeter, the camp lost its generic-ness and became instead this particular Russian structure of its own.

To begin with, the whole place was as handmade as a mud hut. The fence posts shaped like upside-down L's weren't factory stock that had been produced elsewhere but plain logs, peeled and smoothed, with narrow boards atop them to complete the L. And the side of the barracks wall, which from a distance had appeared to be stucco, was actually a daubed plastering over thin strips of lath that crossed each other diagonally, like basketwork. I broke a piece of the plastering off in my hand; at one time it had been painted a pale yellow and it crum-

bled easily. It seemed to be nothing more than a spackle of mud and river sand.

Aside from the nails and the barbed wire, I could see almost no factory-made product that had been used in the construction. Next to the windows were white ceramic insulators that had probably held electrified wire; no trace of mullions or window glass remained. The roof beam ran parallel to the building's length, and along the slope of the roof at each end a facing board about five inches wide had been nailed. These boards covered the raw edge of the roof and extended from beam to eaves, and at the end of each board a very small swirl of scrollwork had been carved. The embellishment was so out of place it caught the eye. I wondered what carpenter or designer had thought to put a touch of decoration on such a building.

Regions of deep cold preserve antiquities just as hot deserts do. Had the climate here been temperate, moisture and vegetation would have consumed this structure long ago. But in northern Siberia, with only twenty or so weeks of reprieve from intense cold every year, and nothing below but permafrost, the old prison camp had hibernated into the present more or less unchanged. Around it, like a bubble of prehistoric air frozen inside a glacier, a familiar atmosphere of 1954 hung on.

Maybe one reason I am susceptible to the dread Russia-love is that Russia evokes childhood for me. In the nineteen-fifties, when I was a boy, adults talked and worried and wondered about Russia all the time. For anyone who grew up then, Russia might have been the only other significant country in the world. I was six years old in 1957, when the Soviets launched Sputnik, and I remember the intense interest my father took in that event. Dad was a chemical engineer and he had a keen admiration for technical ingenuity of every kind. After Sputnik first went up, he used to bring my younger siblings and me into our front yard at night before bedtime to try to show us the satellite as it passed by. At his research lab in Cleveland—he worked for Standard Oil of Ohio—he and his colleagues rigged a radio dish on the roof of the building so they could pick up Sputnik's transmissions. Some evenings after dinner, Dad would put on his long coat and his fedora hat—the style of hat almost every man wore then, from Eisenhower to Clark Gable to Vyacheslav Molotov—and he would drive back to his lab for a night of listening for the satellite. The air of mystery and excitement he gave off as he left made an impression on me. I could tell he got a kick out of this, like a do-it-yourself spy—and in fact, with the Cold War secrecy surrounding Sputnik, the tracking data that he and his colleagues compiled was for a while the only public information about Sputnik available in the United States. When he explained the satellite's orbit to me, I thought about Ohio's actual location on the planet for the first time.

The day the Soviets sent up the rocket carrying Yuri Gagarin, the first man in space, I came in from playing in the yard with my friends and found my father dejectedly hanging up his coat in the front-hall closet. I asked what was wrong and he said the Russians had just launched a man into space, and now we would never catch up to them in the space race. I

IGOR MIKHALEV/FPG/GETTY

The labor camps took citizens the Soviet Union did not need and converted their lives into gold and timber, for trade abroad.

asked why and he said because their scientists were so much smarter than ours, because their country was so much bigger than ours that they had many more brilliant scientists to draw from. Also, he said, their kids were better than our kids at science. I took this last to be aimed at me; I had never been as good at math and science as he had hoped. My father tended to give in to his bad moods and indulge them. He had a flair for gloom and doom.

Years later, when I was walking in Moscow and saw in the distance a big upward-swooping statue with a cosmonaut at the top, and the Russian friend I was with told me it was the Yuri Gagarin monument, I knew for sure that the date on the statue's base would be a date in the spring. I remembered how Dad's dejection had contrasted with the spring afternoon. And I was right—Gagarin's flight had occurred on April 12, 1961.

Dad used to tell my siblings and me—and my mother, too, I suppose—that we had no idea what the rest of the world was like. In our happy Ohio existence we would never understand the war, or the Depression (my mother had lived through the Depression, too), or countries not like America, or how people in places like Russia lived. The word "sheltered" came up a lot. Dad could portray remoteness and imponderability better than anyone I've known. His voice would become sort of furry with melancholy as he said, "You'll never know how they live, or what they went through in the war. Life under somebody like Stalin is so totally removed from your lives." He would shake his head at our innocence and say, "No, it's not anything you'll ever know. It's another world." And, truly, in Hudson, Ohio, in the nineteen-fifties, a prison camp like this one in the fastness of northern Siberia would have seemed as remote from us as the grave of the Titanic at the bottom of the sea.

Sergei came through the snow on the other side of the barracks. He had stopped videotaping and was stepping quietly, almost tiptoeing. I knew he didn't approve of my interest in this sort of thing and I felt some guilt that I had made him see it. But his face as he approached showed no rancor, only a sort of wide-eyed, watchful awe. We didn't say anything to each other. Slowly, simultaneously, we moved to see what the place was like inside. Sergei went in at a door. I stayed outside and looked in a window. I didn't want to seem to be poking around (though of course I was). Going in seemed to be something for him to do rather than for me; he was more like kin, while I was a foreign observer.

The floor of the barracks was worn planking, tightly joined and still sound. I saw nothing on it but a few twists of straw and the wooden sole of a shoe. A short, cylindrical iron stove rusted near a corner. Its stovepipe was gone and the hole for it in the plank roof above had been covered over. Prisoners who had lived in barracks like this reported that the stove usually heated a radius of five to six metres. As this building was maybe ten metres from end to end, areas of it must always have been cold. From inside you could see the logs that the walls were made of. The cracks between the logs had been chinked with moss. The barracks space had been divided into several rooms, with bunks set into the walls. The bunks also were made of bare planks—some planed on both sides, some planed on only one. Planks with the bark still on them had been fitted into the bunks so that the bark side faced down.

This interior offered little to think about besides the limitless periods of suffering that had been crossed off here, and the unquiet rest these bunks had held. Often prisoners in places like this had to sleep on the unimproved planking, or on thin mattresses stuffed with sawdust. For covering they might have had a single blanket, or nothing besides the clothes they wore during the day. Mornings began as early as 4 A.M., when the guards would awaken them by pounding with a hammer on a saw blade. That wakeup alarm and the screeching of the guard dogs' chains on the wires stretched between the watchtowers as the dogs ran back and forth were characteristic sounds of the camps. Before the prisoners went out to work, they were given breakfast—usually soup with a small piece of fish or meat, and bread. Even in 1977, not a lean time, the diet in Soviet strict-regime camps provided only twenty-six hundred calories per prisoner per day, and less in the punishment blocks and sick wards. The international standard for a person actively working is thirty-two hundred to forty-two hundred calories per day. Like almost all labor-camp prisoners, the ones in this barracks would have been hungry almost all the time.

Hunger in the camps made people eat many things. In the gold-mining camps of the Kolyma region, farther east, some of the prisoners ate grass during the warmer months. Intellectuals, for unknown reasons, were more subject to that malady. People who ate grass generally did not live long. Varlam Shalamov, a writer who survived seventeen years in Kolyma, wrote about prisoners there during the war who ate half a barrel of machine grease from Lend-Lease before the guards drove them off with rifle shots. The prisoners had thought the machine grease might be butter; they said it tasted about as much like butter as American bread tasted like bread. They showed no ill effects afterward. In "The Gulag Archipelago," Solzhenitsyn tells of a work crew in Kolyma who were doing excavations when they came across a frozen-solid, perfectly preserved ancient stream, complete with prehistoric fish and salamanders. He said that a magazine of the Soviet Academy of Sciences reported that unfortunately these interesting specimens could not be studied, because the workers who unearthed them ate them on the spot. The magazine did not identify these workers as convict laborers, he said, though from that detail an astute reader would understand that they were.

After breakfast in the lager came inspection, and then the prisoners would be lined up in the camp yard to receive orders for the day. If they were to be sent on a timber-cutting detail, the best assignment was that of taking the smaller limbs trimmed from the downed trees and feeding them to the fire. If their day's job was to work on the road, breaking a path through the snow with their bodies for horses and vehicles to follow, the assignment you wanted least was to be the

man who steered the way, tramping through ahead of the others. Usually, prisoners received no food during their twelve-hour workday. Guards watched them the whole time, and they had to keep within a boundary indicated by pieces of red cloth or other markers distributed around the work site. If a prisoner crossed the boundary area, he would be shot, and the guard who shot him would get a day or two off. Sometimes guards tried to fool prisoners into going over the line just so they could shoot them. If the prisoners were doing road-building, they toiled with picks, sledgehammers, shovels, and wheelbarrows. Even in forty-below weather, the work caused them to sweat heavily. Back at camp at the end of the day, they had to stand in formation for another roll call while the sweat froze in their clothes. Then they marched into the barracks for a supper that was similar to breakfast, followed by a brief time for personal activities like letter-writing and reading the little mail they were allowed. Then sleep.

As a bizarre extra, some camp systems maintained small orchestras. Occasionally in the mornings as the prisoners marched off to work, and in the evenings when they returned, the orchestra would be at the lager gate encouraging them with upbeat melodies.

Of course, the death toll could be cruelly high in camps like these. Well over a million died in the camps just in 1937-1938, the Great Purge's peak years. A main goal of the Soviet labor-camp system was to take those citizens the Soviet Union did not need, for political or social or unfathomable reasons, and convert their lives to gold and timber, which could be traded abroad. Almost from the beginnings of the camps, people outside the country knew or suspected what was going on in them, but the Soviet government simply denied all accusations and the subject receded from view. In 1941, after the Soviet Union joined the Allies and had to release its Polish prisoners, some of these survivors with firsthand experience told what they knew, and the ongoing horror of the camps became established beyond reasonable denial.

When the war was over, and the United States made agreements with Stalin whereby Russian P.O.W.s brought from France and Germany at the end of the war would be repatriated, some of those slated for return committed suicide in places of temporary confinement like Ellis Island and Fort Dix, New Jersey, rather than face the gulag. After Russia re-took Poland, many Poles once again wound up in the gulag. Some who had lived through the Nazi occupation said that Hitler was nothing compared with this, and they now wished they had fought on Hitler's side. A prisoner who had survived the concentration camp at Dachau hanged himself when he learned that he was being shipped to Kolyma. Gulag prisoners who knew the novel "Uncle Tom's Cabin" regretted that fate had put them in this time and place, and not in slavery in the American South a hundred years before. As Negro slaves, they reasoned, at least they would have lived someplace warm, and would have been whipped and branded but not worked to death outright. In 1945, news reached the camps that the United States now possessed the atomic bomb. According to Solzhenitsyn, this unexpected development gave hope to many prisoners, who began to pray for atomic war.

"The defibrillator's not for pressing panini."

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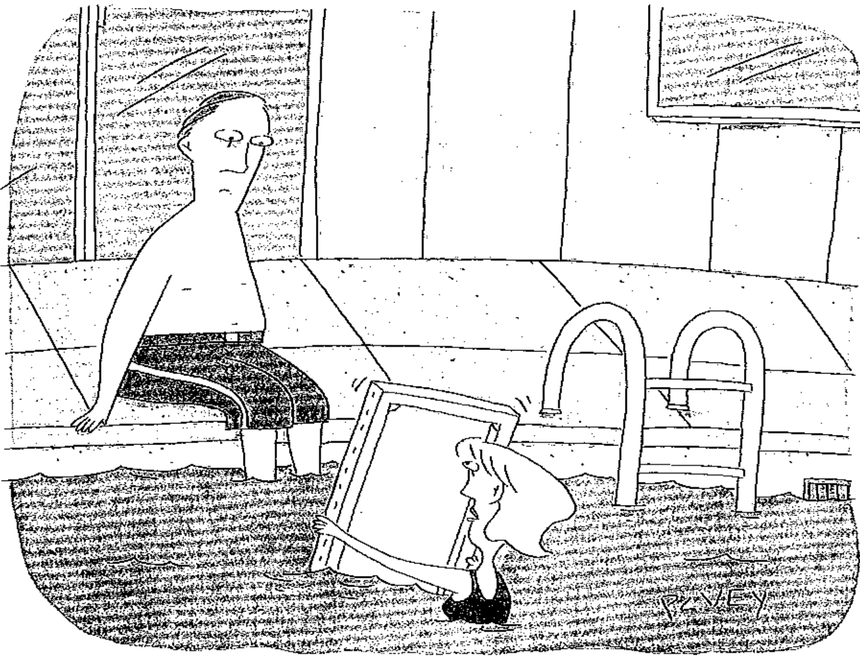
When I looked at the barracks' tiers of bunks I pictured male *zeks*—the word for gulag prisoners—lying on them, but the prisoners here might have been women, too. Female *zeks* worked in timber-cutting camps and on road-building details, and even mined gold. Their resilience was greater than men's, as was their ability to withstand pain. Or perhaps this barracks had been one of those occupied by and completely under the control of criminals. This distressingly numerous class played the camp system to exempt themselves from labor and, with the encouragement of the authorities, preyed on the political prisoners. The criminals' ethics and speech seeped into everybody's life. Political prisoners later said that the criminals in the camps were more dangerous than the meagre food and the killing work conditions. The gulag also had lagers for children. Eugenia Ginzburg, who served eighteen years in the camps of Kolyma, wrote that



"What good is art if you can't have fun with it?"

when a camp of child prisoners was given two guard-dog puppies to raise the children at first could not think of anything to name them. The poverty of their surroundings had stripped their imaginations bare. Finally, they chose names from common objects they saw every day. They named one puppy Ladle and the other Pail.

Unlike the prisons of the tsars, the lagers of Soviet Siberia (or Soviet anywhere) were virtually escape-proof. To anyone sizing up the surroundings of this camp, on the Olchan River, it would have been obvious that the country was tough travelling even for a well-equipped non-native; for a ragged escapee being hunted by guards who feared for their own lives if they failed, the cold and the geography constituted a fearful prison in themselves. Stories of the very few who did get away, even temporarily, became legends in the camps.

Shalamov told the story (a fictional one, like all Shalamov's Kolyma stories, but based on fact) of a prisoner named Krivoshei who escaped from a Kolyma camp by impersonating a geologist. Krivoshei was fortunate in that he had a helpful wife on the outside who kept him supplied with money. One summer day, Krivoshei walked away from his work team, hired some native assistants, and, with a geologist's hammer and a few other props, continued slowly out of the region, collecting rock samples as he went. Occasionally, he would stop and ship crates of random rocks to the Academy of Sciences, in Moscow.

Krivoshei was an educated and self-possessed man, quite believable in his role as a scientist, though he knew nothing about geology. In a month or so, he had crossed the mountain chain that separates Kolyma from Yakutia, and in time he made his way to the city of Yakutsk. To keep up his disguise he paid a visit to the local scientific society, and the directors of the society were so impressed by him that they begged him to give a lecture about his geological discoveries. Having little choice, Krivoshei agreed, cautioning the directors that he must keep certain details secret on orders from Moscow. Then he winged a lecture as best he could, somewhat mystifying his audience. They asked him to repeat it for the local students, and again he obliged. He managed to leave Yakutsk with his cover intact, and he made his way to a small city in western Russia, where he established himself and disappeared from view for a while. The authorities tracked him down as a result of the correspondence he had maintained with his wife, and Krivoshei was re-arrested and shipped back to Kolyma. He had remained at large for two years.

The sun shone brightly in the blue sky, the snow at my knees was a light and fluffy powder, and my breath froze on the fur around the hood of my coat. In dimmer light inside the barracks, Sergei was just standing, not saying anything, getting a sense of what it felt like to be in there. I walked a distance away to see what the barracks looked like from the back. In that direction the fences were more tumble-down and I moved carefully, not wanting to trip over any of that wicked barbed wire in the snow.

The greatest discovery my father's research lab made in the nineteen-fifties, or ever, was of a revolutionary new process for manufacturing a plastic called acrylonitrile. In its fibrous form, this plastic is good at retaining heat, so a packing of acrylonitrile fibres can be an effective substitute for wool or down in cold-weather clothing. Once the process had been perfected and patented, it worked so well and so cheaply that anyone who wanted to make this plastic had to use it. Countries as well as companies lined up to pay the licensing fee. My father's former boss, who had been the head of the research lab at the time of the discovery, once told me that the Soviet Union had been among those countries, and that it had paid the fifteen-million-dollar licensing fee in gold. In those years, most Soviet gold would have come from Kolyma, whose camps were deadlier than timber-cutting or road-building camps like this.

What I'm trying to say is that although the labor camps of the gulag were indeed far from our nineteen-fifties lives, they didn't exist on another planet entirely. For example, some of the barbed wire, a product vital to the camps, might have been of American manufacture; barbed wire was among the hundreds of thousands of tons of Lend-Lease goods shipped from the West Coast to ports of the Soviet Far East. During the thirties, Dalstroi, the mining and construction entity run by the secret police, used some of its gold to purchase machinery and gold-mining equipment from America. American firms sold handcuffs to the

prison apparatus in the Far East. Varlam Shalamov wrote about an incident in a Kolyma camp when a mass grave of *zeks* who had died some time ago came sliding down a mountainside; the cold had kept the bodies undecayed, so that faces could still be recognized. After the bodies were re-buried by a Lend-Lease bulldozer, Shalamov wrote, "on the mirror-like blade there was no scratch, not a single spot." Another author describes a large Marion excavator disintegrating in a mine-tailings dump, broken and rusted, after having been ruined by *zek* operators. Marion earthmoving equipment was made by a company in the town of Marion, in north-central Ohio.

Simply in geographic terms, many of the worst gulag prisons were much closer to America than they were to Moscow. The prisoner-built city of Provideniya is a fifty-minute plane ride from Nome, Alaska. In other parts of Chukotka, the region of Siberia directly across from Alaska, there were said to be prison camps so dreadful that very few prisoners sent to them survived. Anchorage, Alaska, is closer to Kolyma's transit city, Magadan (1,962 miles), than it is to San Francisco (2,005 miles). Magadan is 3,673 miles from Moscow. Even from these camps on the Topolinskaya Highway, the distance to America is about sixteen hundred miles shorter than the distance to Moscow.

Prisoners who suffered the terrible fate of being sentenced to work in the gold-mining camps of the lower Kolyma, in the far north, where that river empties into the Arctic Ocean, went by train to Vladivostok, and there or in the neighboring port of Nakhodka boarded slave ships that could carry thousands of prisoners for the long voyage northward along Siberia's Pacific coast, through the Bering Strait, and westward along the Arctic coast to the Kolyma River delta. These ships sailed with their decks battened down, few lights showing, and the prisoners kept below, in conditions that survivors described as something out of Dante. One method of controlling the prisoners in their cold cages was by hosing them down with seawater. As the reach of Stalin's police began to expand, in the nineteen-thirties, more prisoners were sent to the Far East, and the slave-ship traffic increased.

In the summer of 1933, a ship loaded with thousands of prisoners bound for the Kolyma delta left Nakhodka Harbor. The ship's name was the Dzhurma. At about the same time, a scientific research ship named the Chelyuskin sailed eastward from Arkhangelsk to do studies along the Arctic coast. Winter came on suddenly that year, and in early December the Chelyuskin became stuck in the ice off Chukotka. Soviet newspapers reported extensively on this crisis, and people all over Russia and around the world followed the Chelyuskin's predicament.

Eventually, the scientists and crew were rescued by Soviet pilots in a daring operation, widely trumpeted in the Soviet news. Other nations had offered to help the Chelyuskin, but the Russians refused all assistance. Years later, observers of the U.S.S.R. guessed why. As it turned out, the slave ship Dzhurma had also become frozen in the ice, and was just two hundred miles from the Chelyuskin. Possibly the Soviets had not wanted the world to know that the slave ship existed at all. What happened on that icebound ship, with food gone and hope of rescue lost, is only hinted at today. It is said that the dead were eaten by the living. The story may even be a legend, or a confusion of details from other slave-ship voyages. According to one account, when the ship finally reached port, the following spring, some of the surviving guards and crew had gone insane and none of the prisoners were still on board.

The Kolyma slave-ship voyages, among the grisliest of the many grisly events of Soviet times, also came the closest to American shores. Sailing through the Bering Strait, the ships would have passed within about twenty-five miles of the U.S. border. Under the right conditions, a person standing on U.S. soil would have been able to see the ships as they passed by.

While Sergei and I were exploring the camp, the driver and the other passengers waited for us in the vehicle. We could not delay them much longer. Sergei had already started up the slope, walking backward and videotaping as he went. I took another turn around the inside of the perimeter and then exited at the gate. I now saw that what had once been the lager's driveway curved to the left through a denser stand of trees, and I followed it, knowing that it would soon intersect the road. Before the trees obscured the view, I stopped to look at the camp one last time.

What struck me then and still strikes me now was the place's overwhelming aura of absence. The deserted prison camp just sat there—unexcused, untorn-down, unexplained. During its years of operation, it had been a secret, and in some sense it still was. Horrors had happened here, and/or miseries and sufferings and humiliations short of true horrors. "No comment," the site seemed to say.

I thought that this camp, and all the others along this road, needed large historical markers in front of them, with names and dates and details; and there should be ongoing archeology here, and areas roped off, and painstaking excavation, and well-informed docents in heated kiosks giving talks to visitors. Teams of researchers should be out looking for camp survivors, if any, and for former guards, and for whoever had baked the bread in the bakery. Extensive delving into K.G.B. or Dalstroi files should be finding out who exactly was imprisoned here when, and what they were in for, and what became of them. The *zek* engineers and builders who made the hand-constructed bridges should be recognized and their photographs placed on monuments beside the road, and the whole Topolinskaya Highway, for all its hundred and eighty-nine kilometres, should be declared a historic district, and the graves, of which there may be many, should be found and marked and given requiem.

Beneath a surface layer of unbelief or Orthodox Christianity, Russia is an animist country. Ordinary physical objects are alive in Russia far more than they are in America, and, however Russia's religious or political currents flow, this native animism remains strong. Trees, streets, utensils, groves, machines—each has its own spirit and its own personality, like the cabin belonging to the witch Baba Yaga that could get up on its chicken legs and run around. A Russian telephone isn't just a phone, it's a being; once, at my friend Alex Melamid's mother's apartment when I was having trouble dialling her phone, she showed me how, explaining, "He likes

to be dialled slowly." In Russia, alarm clocks don't ring; they burst into rooster-crowing. Another friend, Luda, had a clock in her apartment that announced the hours in an old-lady voice: "The time is one o'clock exactly!" Luda referred to the clock as *moya tyotka*—"my auntie." When you pass a turnstile on the St. Petersburg or Moscow metro without paying, there's not a siren sound, as in New York, but a frantic chirping, as if you'd just trod on some creature's nest. In Russia the windshield wiper on your car isn't called a mechanical name—it's a *dvornik*, a word whose more common meaning is "custodian." What we call a speed bump in America the Russians call *lezhachii politseiskii*, which means "lying-down policeman."

The animism applies especially to buildings. In Russia a building is regarded and spoken of not just as itself but as a manifestation of the will of the person who ordered its construction or who held power when it went up. People often pointed out to me Khrushchev buildings and Brezhnev buildings. In Vologda, a city in western Russia, I was shown a church that had been constructed at the command of Ivan the Terrible, who denied food to the builders in order to get them to work faster. The Vologda church doesn't just evoke the memory of Ivan the Terrible; it *is*, in a sense, Ivan the Terrible. The echo of his capricious and brutal spirit may be said to inhabit it as long as the church stands. And certainly no other individual personality in history has ever occupied a city as thoroughly as Peter the Great occupies St. Petersburg. Pushkin imagined a deathless bronze Peter on his bronze horse chasing citizens down the city's wide streets. In Peterhof, the palace compound that Peter built west of the city, there is to this day a grove of metal trees that can be made to squirt water at unwary passersby, just as they used to do in Peter's time. Whenever a tourist gets soaked, the wild Tsar's laughter resounds in a neighboring dimension, intangible but full of his presence, that still hovers all around.

By this metaphysic, the camp I was looking at, and all the camps along this road, and the road itself, were Stalin. His was the single animating spirit of the place. The road project and its camps had come into existence by his fiat, had continued to exist in fear of his will, and had ended like a blown-out match with his death. The fact that the world has not yet decided what to say about Stalin was the reason these camps were standing with no change or context; the sense of absence here was because of that.

The world more or less knows what it thinks of Hitler. Stalin, though, is still beyond us. As time passes, he seems to be sidling into history as one of those old-timey, soft-focus monsters—like Ivan the Terrible, like Peter the Great—whose true monstrosity softens to resemble that of an ogre in a fairy tale. Hitler killed millions, and we have a rough idea how many, but the millions of victims of Stalin are still difficult to count. There were the millions his policies starved, and the million-plus whose executions he personally brought about, and the millions he sent to death in the camps. Historians estimate that anywhere from fifty-five to sixty million Russians died of unnatural causes as a result of the Bolshevik Revolution, from its beginning, in 1917, to the fall of Communism, in 1992. A large fraction of those deaths must be blamed on Stalin.

And yet somehow Stalin gets a pass. People know he was horrible, but he has not yet been declared horrible officially. Hitler's minions were tried and convicted and (some of them) hanged, but the only trials examining the crimes of the Stalin regime were the absurd and obscene show trials he staged to give himself a cover for murdering more. Perhaps the world has even bought the P.R. he engineered about himself, with the photographs in which he holds smiling children on his knee (children whose parents he later killed)—those happy photographs of him with a twinkle in his eye. That ogre's twinkle seems to have achieved its purpose. During recent American elections, TV and other commentators sometimes quoted Stalin's remark "It's not the people who vote that count—it's the people who count the votes." As a comparison, is it possible to imagine any commentator under any circumstances quoting a witty remark of Hitler's? In the nineteen-sixties, Stalin's daughter came to America to live, and was accepted here, and even wrote a best-seller; would any of that have been possible for the daughter of Hitler, or any other famous Nazi? America had to be civil, at least, to Svetlana Allilueva; her father had been our ally. He appeared on the cover of *Time* eleven times.

Further complicating the problem is the fact that Stalin's popularity continues to grow among the Russians themselves. On the subject of the greatest leaders in Russian history, public-opinion polls regularly rank him at or near the top. No doubt he benefits from the camouflage provided by Russian leaders who went before; Hitler's crimes seemed unique in European history, but Stalin could be seen as another bloody tsar, or as an Arakcheyev (Tsar Alexander I's chief enforcer) with industrially augmented killing power. Stalin was actually incomparably worse than his predecessors all the way back to the Mongol Khan Batu, but the illusion of continuity makes him look less bad. On top of that, he killed far and away more Russians—of many ethnicities and regions, but Russians all the same—than foreigners. If now his countrymen, his principal victims, don't want him and his era brought to account, and are praising him instead . . . well, then what?

Stalin never saw this or any other Siberian gulag with his own eyes. Once he attained power, he seldom left western Russia, preferring to stay in or near the Kremlin most of the time. Perhaps the unhappy fate of almost every Russian ruler who set foot in Siberia gave him pause. Although he had passed through western Siberia often as a young man (he claimed six escapes), neither then nor afterward was he ever east of Baikal. His underlings must occasionally have shown him charts of this Topolinskaya road and its system of prison camps, and maybe they even showed him photographs. But for him this camp would have been only a point on a map, a detail of a plan. The strange feeling of absence that prevailed in the frozen silence here had to do with the secrecy and evil of the place's conception, and with its permanent abandonment, in shame, after its author was gone. Now the place existed only nominally in present time and space; the abandoned camp was a single preserved thought in a dead man's mind. ♦