

AUTO PREVIEW ISSUE...THE 1956 CARS

# TRUE

THE MAN'S MAGAZINE

**A TRUE EXCLUSIVE!**  
American John Noble  
reveals how  
**I CHEATED RUSSIA'S  
WHITE DEATH**

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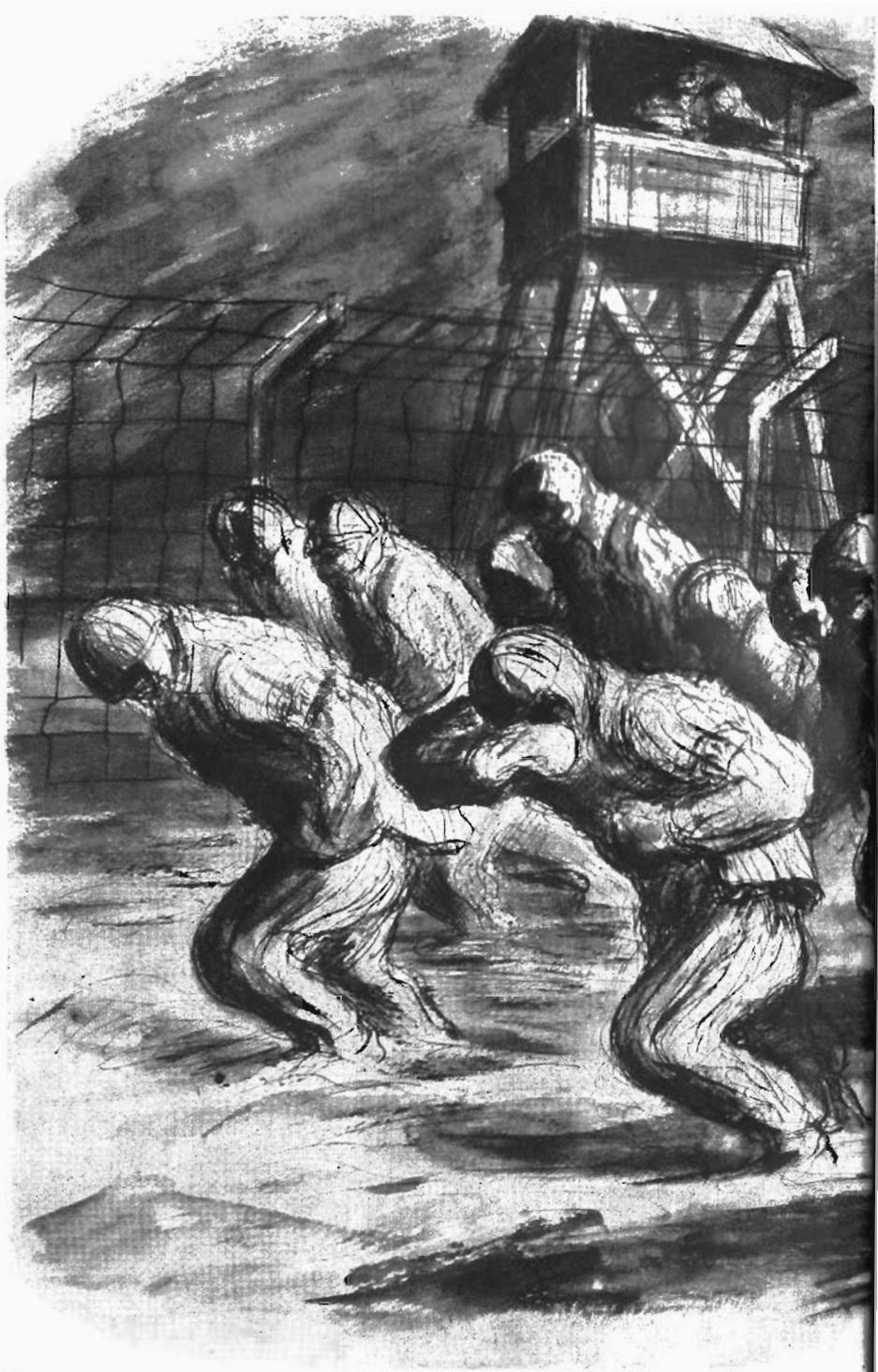
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## A TRUE BOOK-LENGTH FEATURE

BY JOHN H. NOBLE  
as told to  
MARTIN L. GROSS

Illustrated by John Groth

When the Red's imprisoned me for helping GI's head home I ended up as Stalin's slave at deadly Vorkuta. Now free, I can tell the terrible story of the land of no return—and how...



# I cheated **RUSSIA'S**

"You," the Red NCO yelled toward me. "Nationality?" "Amerikanetz!" I shouted back in one of the few words of Russian I could handle.

The effect was electrifying. The bored guards, who had been looking out over the bleak arctic tundra, spun their heads around and stared at me unbelieving.

"Noble! Christian name? Father's name? Paragraph?"

The man rumbly the questions at me in a typical Russian growl was surrounded by a half-dozen jack-booted

MVD troops (obvious by their blue epaulets) carrying *balalaikas*, the omnipresent Soviet tommyguns. With 70 other men I was standing on a railroad siding at Vorkuta, the Devil's Island of the arctic north—pearl of the Soviet Union's slave-labor empire.

I called out my name, John, and in Russian style my father's name instead of a middle initial. "No paragraph," I barked back at the Red NCO. The other prisoners, *blatnoi*—professional Russian criminals—and political pris-



Every day, in the frigid arctic blasts, my group staggered 1½ miles from camp to mine through a barbed-wire corridor.

# WHITE DEATH

oners from half the nations of the world had been sentenced under the Soviet Criminal Code for treason, espionage, agitation, or ordinary crime.

Dressed in rags and with a shaved scalp, I was 7,000 miles from my hometown of Detroit, Michigan. I had been sentenced to 15 years of hard labor by the *Troika*—the court in Moscow no one ever sees—without trial or a formal charge that I had violated Soviet law. I was a victim of weird Soviet logic that somehow made a crime out of my

helping American GIs who had been POWs of the Nazis get out of the Soviet sector of Germany after World War II.

I was born and brought up in the States. As a kid in my teens I had been caught by World War II on a visit to Germany with my parents. The Nazis put us under local internment. When VE day came, our place in Dresden was behind Soviet lines, 35 miles from the American Army. I raised an American flag I had made and hidden from the Germans, and soon I was running a convalescent center for



Grimly silent, the *blatnoi* were playing cards. As the game progressed, the tension in the barracks mounted swiftly.

starving, sick GIs and officers who had been freed by the Russians and were straggling back to the American sector on foot.

The psychopathically suspicious Russians thought we were running an American intelligence network. One day in a sudden raid the MVD swooped down and arrested me, my father, 12 GIs and, soon after, an American colonel from the 76th Division.

That was in 1945, right after VE day. It was now September 16, 1950, and I had already been a Russian prisoner in East Germany for more than five years. When that Red NCO began firing his questions, I had just been hustled out of a boxcar, along with a load of other prisoners. Two weeks I had spent in that, but for a month before I had traveled lying on my stomach on the wooden shelf of a cage-like Stolopinsky prison car—one modern innovation actually invented by the Russians.

We were miles from town and the camps. I could see only the open tundra, covered here and there with snow even though it was still summer.

"Nothing grows this far north," a Russian-Chinese who spoke some English had told me a few days ago on the boxcar. We had been traveling past thick forests when suddenly the trees got smaller, then started to grow along the ground like small bushes. We had reached the arctic timberline. Thereafter we were to pass through nothing except the desertlike tundra of the far north.

Vorkuta is mentioned in hushed tones by the Russians and has been seen by only a few Americans. Vorkuta is 600 square miles of barbed wire, camps and coal mines, and it is part of the Russian empire of 20,000,000 half-men held in slavery in hundreds of camps from Vyazma outside

of Moscow to the gold fields of Magadan in the Far East. Vorkuta has an unsavory reputation even in this feared nation-within-a-nation run by GULAG, *Glavnoye Upravleniya Lagerei*, the Penal Labor Camp Division of the hated MVD.

GULAG was supposedly established for the "re-education of prisoners through corrective labor." Actually it's a huge Soviet trust that puts Pharaoh's pyramid building to shame. We slaves mined 80 percent of Russia's coal, a large part of its minerals, we cut its lumber, and we built its canals and dams.

Vorkuta is the coldest and cruellest place on earth. It sits in the Komi Republic near the Ural Mountains at the extreme northeastern tip of European Russia—50 miles above the Arctic Circle and just 50 miles south of the Arctic Ocean. Snow covers the ground ten months of the year with a blanket more than six feet deep. The temperature drops as low as 72 degrees below zero Centigrade (−90 Fahrenheit). It sits unprotected against 100-mile-an-hour icy snowstorms that blow off the Siberian wastes. The sun shines only briefly. During January and part of February it is an eerie night 24 hours a day.

I was coal slave 1E-241, one of 400,000 *rabskaya rabota*, slave laborers. We worked on a starvation diet, producing all the coal for Leningrad (connected to Vorkuta by a single railroad 1,400 miles long)—one-twelfth the entire Red output. Our reward was usually an unmarked 6-foot hole in the snow. Those who survived their sentences lived out their miserable lives as permanent exiles, part of the 200,000 so-called "free people" who make up the town and *posiolki* (settlements) of Vorkuta.

It was a humiliating life except for two memorable

weeks in the summer of 1953. Encouraged by the July 17 East German riots and the power struggle in the Kremlin after the death of Stalin, 100,000 slaves, including myself, laid down our tools in a mass revolt and chased the MVD guards from our camp. We rebelled in a tremendous strike that dumbfounded the Reds and paralyzed Moscow for over a week. It was the first major uprising in the Soviet Union in 35 years.

Personally, I think I'm a lucky ex-slave with just an enlarged liver from too much cabbage soup and a miserable set of falling teeth—but most important I'm one of the few alive and free to tell the story.

**W**hen the roll call at the Vorkuta railroad siding was finished, the Russian NCO barked "*Shagom marsh*"—"get going." We walked toward the *peresilka*, the transit camp for new arrivals. MVD guards with tommyguns and two hungry-looking police dogs took up the rear. Suddenly the MVD non-com snapped an order.

"What did he say?" I asked my Russian-Chinese friend. "Not to turn our heads or break line. If we do we'll be shot right here."

At the transit camp I was given a 2-minute examination by a female doctor who pinched my rear and pronounced me fit for heavy-duty work. I was issued the slave outfit common to all Russia—a blue, cotton-padded jacket called a *bushlat* (women prisoners get black), cotton-padded pants, and a cotton hat—*shapka*—that had ear flaps. Across the hat and pants, my slave number was sewn in black cloth. There was little chance to forget who or where I was, although the *peresilka* proved to be, comparatively speaking, a vacation resort.

Two weeks later I was on a train headed farther north along with a group of Russians and Ukrainians. We made a short stop at the town of Vorkuta, comparatively modern with street lamps, planked wooden sidewalks and a bronze statue of Joseph Stalin extending greetings to the *Komsomol*, the Young Communists who the Reds claim built the polar town.

I could see a few hundred slaves like ourselves working with pick and ax, breaking ground for a new apartment building.

"Look at the Young Communists!" my Russian companions sneered.

From the town we went north 20 miles into the far northern region of the Vorkuta complex. Our destination was Camp No. 3, where 4,500 men worked three of the 40 coal pits of Vorkuta. With 120 other men I was assigned to an ugly barracks about a mile and a half from Mine No. 16. There I was to work as a slave for the next three years.

Our barracks were low rectangular affairs propped just above the tundra. Posts had been jammed into the frozen ground and boards nailed on both sides of them to create walls. The space between was filled with ashes for insulation, then the walls were covered with mud and straw to fill all holes.

It was now October and the six-week summer was over. A sheet of snow already covered the ground.

Prisoners were working outside propping blocks of snow against the barrack walls as protection against the cold ahead. Within a short time the temperature would drop to the usual Vorkuta 25 to 45 below zero.

I looked at my bunk. It was actually just a 2-foot width of wooden shelf, one of the double-deck pairs that ran the full length of the barracks. I was upstairs so I shinnied up a pole. There was no sheet, mattress, pillow or blanket—just a hard wooden slab. I untied my precious roll of extra clothes I had taken with me from the Red concentration camp in Buchenwald. I had on the trench coat I was wearing the day of my arrest in 1945, and I put it underneath me like a mattress.

When my bunkmate, a big Russian peasant who smelled of *machorka* (crude tobacco), lay down our shoulders were touching. Later, when new men came in, I had to sleep on my side flat against the next man. Some men were sleeping on the floor just as packed as I was.

The only ones who seemed to enjoy the arrangement were the *Chorni Zhopie*, the dark-complexioned Georgians known as "black asses," many of whom were homosexuals. To them, the miserably close quarters were an arctic haven.

The barracks were dark, with only two small windows and two naked electric bulbs hanging from the roof. Heat was provided by a pot-bellied stove at one end. At the far end was the drying room, a stinking hole where prisoners back from the mine hung up their unwashed clothes to dry.

It was a human jungle, smelly and overcrowded.

Soon after I arrived I looked into the security set-up. From what I saw we were precious cargo indeed. Inside the camp the MVD guards were unarmed (for fear of having their guns stolen). Outside, though, Camp 3 was surrounded by a 12-foot barbed-wire fence punctuated with tall towers manned by machine gunners. The towers were connected by telephone and an electric alarm system. A few yards inside the outer fence was one three feet high. The snowy area between was designated a prohibited zone, and lit up



My job was to push a 2-ton car loaded with waste slate from the mine elevator to a dump pit. I did it 70 times a day for fourteen months.

24 hours a day with powerful arc lights. The MVD shot there on sight. Police dogs scouted the entire camp.

I was sure Vorkuta was escape-proof. During my first week a Pole who had once lived in Chicago heard about "the Amerikanetz" and dropped in to say hello. I asked him about the chances of getting away.

"Where could you go even if you got out?" he said. "You might get past the fences during a snowstorm, but the tundra and the snow would get you. No one has made it since I've been here. Remember, you're worth a lot to the Reds—the Komi nomads get 10,000 rubles for every slave brought back. The Red Army also has outposts dug into the tundra and their planes fly overhead looking for escapees."

Officially our camp of 4,500 men was run by an MVD unit commanded by Major Tchevchenko (a skeletonlike soul who couldn't take the cold) and his political officer, Captain Bykov (bull in Russian), a tall, thick-necked officer who threw prisoners into the *bor*, the camp prison-within-a-prison, merely on the word of the cursed *stukachi*, the secret MVD informers. Under Tchevchenko and Bykov were the prisoner-officers called *naryadchiki*, *desedniki* and *brigadiers*—overlords of five to 1,000 men. A good 95 percent of the slaves were violently anti-Communist, but a few of the prisoner-officers still loyal to the Kremlin served as informers.

Unofficially, however, Vorkuta had a different master. Our camp was ruled with a steel fist by a band of 250 *blatnoi*—hardened Russian criminals. They kept the political prisoners in abject fear. There were about eight *blatnoi* in my barracks, living on a shelf at the far end big enough for 20 politicals. They spent their time sleeping, stealing whatever they admired, sharpening knives shaped from eating utensils, playing homemade *balalaikas*, dancing the *plaska*, a fast dance like the Spanish flamenco—and killing.

The bodies of the *blatnoi* were covered with grotesque tattoos. One I remember had a giant design of human testicles etched in brilliant red across his chest.

No brigadier, including my boss, Politayev, a former Red Army commissar and *politruk* (political officer) serving a 20-year term because he had been captured by the Nazis, dared

ask a *blatnoi* to work. And if a *blatnoi* on his part as much as lifted a shovel, he was murdered instantly by his comrades.

The *blatnoi* were unemotional professionals, mostly in their 20's, serving short sentences for theft and murder. They had begun life as *besprizornye*, the vagrant children that travel in bands throughout the Soviet, robbing as they go. They had been raised under Communism, but they knew nothing about politics and cared less.

A few days after I arrived I saw that the *blatnoi* stopped at nothing to keep their iron grip. I had dropped into a nearby barracks to visit my English-speaking Polish friend. While we were talking, a Ukrainian walked up, fear etched in his eyes, whispering an announcement.

"What did he say?" I asked.

"He says the *blatnoi* are playing cards," the Pole answered with the same dread.

"What's so important about their playing cards?"

He looked at me nervously. "Come, you shall see."

We walked toward the far end of the barracks. Five *blatnoi* were seated below the naked electric bulb. Between them was an improvised table. They were playing cards intently, without a word, their eyes focused on the dealer's hand.

"What are the stakes?" I asked. "They must be high."

"Very high," he answered solemnly. "Murder! The low scorer has to kill the man marked for death by the *blatnoi*. It happens every week."

A cautious few like ourselves had gathered near the playing table, but when the *blatnoi* kicked it over we quickly dispersed. I went back to my friend's shelf and watched the course of the drama from there.

The losing player, a young blond about 18, calmly approached a lower bunk near me. He had a padded jacket in one hand and a knife in the other. Sleeping on the shelf was a well-fed prisoner, one of the cooks.

The *blatnoi* suddenly leaped at the cook. In one swift movement he threw the jacket over the cook's head, held him down with a viselike grip around the neck, and jabbed the long blade to the hilt a dozen times into the victim's chest and stomach.

The cook screeched. Dripping blood, he pushed the *blatnoi*

off him with a desperate shove and lurched down the aisle toward the door. He got about 15 feet, then collapsed and died in a pool of his own blood. I fled.

I had never seen such a killing. Later I heard the victim was decapitated with an ax by two *blatnoi*. Then, following their tradition of "honor," the young killer had carried the cook's head in his hand—its transfixed eyes still registering horror—right up to the main gate. He proudly confessed the killing and presented the head to the MVD guard as proof of his work.

The cook had paid the penalty for frustrating a *blatnoi* scheme. Often a criminal would "buy" a woolen suit from a new slave and pay for it with extra rations. The *blatnoi* chief would take the prisoner down to the cook and explain, "This man is to get extra soup both meals for 30 days." The now-headless cook had refused just once to go along with the proposition.

The killer was given the usual 2-month sentence in the camp prison—not a day of it in the cold cell, a special MVD torture reserved for politicals. The MVD and the *blatnoi* had an unwritten understanding. In return for keeping the politicals cowed, the tattooed criminals had the run of Vorkuta. One of their murder victim was [Continued on page 100]



"Russian Devils" the Kalmuk shrieked as he stood in the center of the floor. He slapped his right hand onto a barracks stool and swung the hatchet as we watched.

# I CHEATED RUSSIA'S WHITE DEATH

Photo by H. M. Mason, Jr.



Still recovering from the horror of Vorkuta, John Noble eats well now, moves freely—and remembers.

[Continued from page 20]

found in the barracks or on the snow at least once a week, his head opened by a food chopper.

I was living in a mad arctic jungle, and it scared the hell out of me. Fortunately I had one advantage. As the only American in camp I became a museum piece. I was treated with special respect. Despite the anti-American propaganda, the U.S.A. is still the land of magic to the Russians in Vorkuta.

I decided to take whatever advantage there was in being an American. I would play the lone wolf. "I'll never learn their Russian language," I thought. "Maybe some day the Reds will get thrown out or the U.S. government will find out where I am and get me out." Until that hoped-for date, I resolved not to think about my release date of 1965.

**M**y life in Vorkuta was the closest possible to a living death. It was a grueling combination of starvation, work, cold and abject monotony that had destroyed many a healthier man than me.

There was no wasted time. The day I arrived Politayev, the brigadier of surface transportation at Mine 16, looked me over and picked me for his work brigade. My job was to push a mine car by hand. Some of the new slaves complained that they couldn't handle such heavy work.

"*Sukinsin!*" (son-of-a-bitch) one disgruntled prisoner yelled at Politayev. Disdainfully the brigadier eyed the heckler, then pointed out a mine slave lying on his bunk. This was one of the unfortunates who crawled like rodents through 2½-foot tunnels to chip out coal. He had a blank animal-like expression, his hair had turned white, and his eyes were sunk deep in his cadaverous face. All his bones protruded through a thin skin covering. I turned away, sick to my stomach.

For the next 14 months, though, my lot wasn't much better. In fact, I never expected to live through the winter of 1950-51.

My day began about 4:45 a.m. when a guard came through

yelling "Vstan!"—"Get up!" I washed in the snow stripped to the waist. The entire operation had to be done quickly. One minute was fine, but five minutes could produce a bad frostbite. The snow stung and my body turned a beet red, but it was clean.

Breakfast was at 5:30. It consisted of two scoops of *kasha* (grits) and a small bowl of watery cabbage soup.

There were two meals a day. First thing each morning I received the basic ration of 1¼ pounds of sticky black bread. Baked less than an hour, it was soaked with a 60-percent water content which made it, despite its weight, only a third the size of an American pound loaf. It was too wet to eat until I toasted it over the barracks stove.

Dinner came 12 hours after breakfast. It was the same meal plus a thimbleful of sunflower oil to pour over the *kasha*, a 1¼-inch square of fish, and a roll the size of a small egg. Every ten days I got two ounces of tough reindeer meat instead of the fish. Once, on May Day, we had pork.

I worked on the surface that first year in the worst Vorkuta winter in 10 years. My job was a mile and a half away from the camp. Little arctic safaris of 50 of us, covered by 10 guards with tommyguns and two police dogs, made the trip every morning through a 40-foot-wide corridor leading to Mine 16.

**B**linding snowstorms often blew up out of nowhere. An ugly one hit one night not long after I arrived. By morning the 12-foot fence protruded only a few inches above the snow. We ran to work huddled together, the snow blowing in great blinding swirls in front of our faces. I was wearing the protective mask issued by the camp, but when my breath began to freeze painfully against my skin I threw it into the snow and staggered on with my arm raised up for cover.

Suddenly the slave next to me pointed to my chin. It had turned white, the first sign of frostbite. Anxiously I started to rub the circulation back with my bare hands, but it was 10 minutes before it got red again. I stopped just in time, for the backs of my hands were beginning to show telltale white spots of the frost that takes off hundreds of toes and fingers every year in Vorkuta.

The car I was to push at Mine 16 turned out to be a 2-ton affair loaded with slate. My partner, a Latvian, briefed me on the job in sign language. Waste slate came up the mine elevator and was dumped into our car. We were supposed to push it 160 yards by hand, then tilt the slate into another car below. We had to do this 70 times a day, back and forth.

I looked at the rails covered with snow and the immense car. "It's impossible," I thought.

Unfortunately it was only nearly impossible, and I became a human locomotive for the next 14 months. After we dumped the slate an American-made electric pulley brought it to the top of a 60-foot heap. Every few days I worked the heap. The climate 60 feet up was like that of a Himalayan peak, with a pricking wind that almost hurled me off the slate mountain with every step.

There was no protection against the weather. According to labor camp regulations we weren't supposed to work in temperatures under 40 below zero but that was a local gag. Major Tchevchenko was responsible to MVD General Derevyenko, boss of all Vorkuta, who was in turn responsible to the Kremlin for Vorkuta's coal output. Consequently Derevyenko wouldn't have countenanced a day's stoppage if the moustache had frozen on Stalin's statue in Vorkuta. One day the thermometer dropped suddenly to 72 below, freezing the axle grease on my car. But the work went on.

I stole oil rags from the mechanics' shop and wrapped them around my hands, and my feet were each encased in a large rag which was actually warmer than a sock. But nothing could keep the cold out.

Officially there was no break, even for lunch, in our work, but traditional Russian inefficiency saved my life. One day the mine elevator stopped working and no slate came up. My Latvian friend pointed to the mine powerhouse and explained it would take 10 minutes to fix the elevator. With him I raced to the powerhouse, where smiling Russian prisoners were warming themselves over a stove. It was great except that my boots froze when I went out again.

I felt like a primitive slave—starving, breaking my body, not knowing enough of the language to have anyone to bitch to. That winter of 1950-1951 I had just enough stamina to make it back to the camp every night. After dinner I collapsed on the hard shelf-bed in my filthy snow-soaked clothes. I could hardly

lift my stiffened legs. Only the palms of my hands, turned to calloused elephant skin, were mercifully insensitive to cold or pain.

Starvation, climate and work dropped my weight from 155 pounds to 95. Where my bones pushed outward, the skin turned a deep brown. With the fat eaten away, the skin hung in big folds. I longed for sleep, but even sleeping all day on my day off (three days a month) couldn't shake my tiredness. About 90 percent of us suffered from abnormally high blood pressure or heart disease, the blights of the polar region. My wrists and ankles swelled regularly. Everyone looked like a skeleton (the average weight was 75-115 pounds), a fact that hit me hardest every 10 days when we were taken to the camp *banya*—bath—to wash the filth away (we also had our shiny heads—the slave's mark of distinction—shaved back down to the scalp).

Our teeth rotted. There was no dental care—only extractions. Most men had their teeth missing, especially the lowers.

There was one saving factor. It was just too cold for most bacteria to live in Vorkuta. Only tuberculosis was common.

It was almost impossible to avoid the killing work. Any refusal meant time in the cold cell. Prisoners were stripped and put in an unheated stone room, their hands chained to the wall and their thighs straddled over a concrete block that rubbed the fierce 50-below cold into sensitive skin.

A friend of mine who had been accused of a slowdown was stuck in the cold cell for five days. "After one night you'll do anything they ask," he told me. "All I ever wanted again was to get into a warm room."

We were all driven by the Communist "norm," a schedule more diabolical than any ancient slavemaster. My norm was to push all the slate that came up. Others had so many feet of shoring to erect in the shafts, so many tons of coal to be dug. Those who didn't fulfill their norms were put on punishment rations—less than half the normal diet. It was a vicious circle. Those too weak to work became weaker, so the brigadiers shunted them from job to job until their emaciated bodies just gave out. Only the lucky ones got the good-looking 20-year-old girl *feldsher* (one of the half-trained doctors of Vorkuta) to declare them restricted to lighter work.

Until 1948 escapees were shot immediately. Since then they have been thrown into the cold cell—but not before the MVD guards, who face death sentences for a successful escape, give them a going over.

There was really only one way to beat the Communists and

## A True Book-Length Feature

many prisoners used it. That was to disable oneself so badly you could only be a *sushilchik*, an attendant, who took care of the drying room and the stove.

One evening a loud yell startled me. I jerked up off the shelf. In the center of the aisle stood a fierce-looking Asiatic Kalmuk, one of the remnants of the Kalmuk Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. In 1943 the Russians killed and imprisoned almost all the 225,000 Kalmuks, including babies and women, and discontinued the republic when their men refused to fight in the Red Army.

The Kalmuk had a stolen hatchet raised in his left hand. All eyes were on him. He placed his right hand palm down on a stool.

"*Ruskiye cherti!*—Russian devils! No more work from me!" he shrieked.

As the words came out he swung the hatchet down in a resounding blow that struck the right hand just above the knuckles. Four fingers flew out onto the floor. The blood fountained out of the stump and covered his face and clothes. He wrapped two filthy rags around the remains of his hand and crawled back onto his shelf, clanking himself to sleep cursing the Russians. Next day he was given two months in the camp jail, but he never again did heavy work for the MVD.

Commonly prisoners rubbed dirt into self-made wounds until they couldn't walk. The shrewd ones threw apoplectic fits and tried to simulate high blood pressure by drinking vast amounts of fluids before an examination. Some succeeded, others got time in the cold cell for sabotage.

Tchevchenko raged with fury whenever waves of these work-evading tricks came on. He was deathly afraid his wards, Mines 12, 14 and 16, would no longer send enough coal to Leningrad.

I lived in this mad world for more than half a year, lonely and with little to occupy my mind. I thought a lot about food. Not exotic dishes, steaks or ice cream, but plain milk and fruit. I saw shining white glasses of milk and clean pears in my dreams.

Enviously I watched the lucky ones get food packages from home. The Russian packages from farm areas were generally



One night we went dog hunting for food. As one of the town dogs trotted up, I hit him swiftly and we cut him open at once.

# I CHEATED RUSSIA'S WHITE DEATH

just a bag of onions and some tea leaves. But the Latvians, Lithuanians and Estonians, whose countries' former prosperity hasn't yet been completely destroyed by Red rule, got whole-some packages with sugar, bacon, lard and sausages. Such packages were quickly divided among a prisoner's hungry friends, who tried to make them last a few days.

Days passed into weeks, weeks into months. I wondered whether the U.S. government was doing anything. I wasn't even sure it knew where I was. I received no mail and I wasn't allowed to write to my mother and my brother George, long since safely back in the States, to my father, who was still in a Russian prison in East Germany, to the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, or to anyone else. Tchevchenko even refused me a Red Cross postcard, a basic international right.

At the time the American State Department *was* working for my release—although I didn't learn about it until four years later. The Department, however, had only the limited information that my mother and brother had given them. In 1945, immediately after the Russians let them go, they had reported to the American authorities. In February 1946 the first State Department note about me was sent to Moscow. It was a formal protest, asking why I had been arrested, where I was being held and when I would be released. The Russians answered that they "had no knowledge of one John H. Noble." My mother and brother persisted in their pleas to the State Department, and in consequence it sent the Russians periodic notes until 1950. The Russians either repeated their former answer or ignored the notes entirely. No one back home really knew whether I was dead or alive.

I first met my Russian masters in May 1945, a few days after the Nazi capitulation in World War II. I was in Dresden, in what is now Eastern Germany, with my family—father, mother, and brother. We were one of the 900 American families caught in Germany by World War II and held in local internment.

I was born and brought up in Detroit, where I had lived until high-school age, when my father left for Kissengen, Germany, and Karlsbad, Czechoslovakia, for special treatment of his gall-bladder ailment. The European phase of the war broke out soon after we arrived. I was only a kid of 15. As American citizens traveling under a U.S. passport, my parents felt we were safe. America was neutral and they thought the condition would continue indefinitely.

Then on December 8, 1941, the morning after Pearl Harbor, the Germans placed us under house arrest in Dresden. We were sent to the German side of the Swiss border as the first step toward repatriation. At the last minute, two Gestapo agents suddenly stepped in and halted the processing for my family. For some reason we weren't being allowed to leave.

We sweated out the war in Dresden including a devastating American bombardment that leveled the town. After VE Day, the American and Russian armies met at a line 35 miles west of Dresden. Dresden itself was occupied by the Russians.

Back in 1943 I had made a large American flag from colored cloth and hidden it from the Nazis. The day of victory I raised it on a tall pole over our house as a sign to the occupying Russians that we were Americans. The morning of May 10 I answered a knock on the door. It was an American GI. He wore a torn uniform and had a heavy beard.

"I saw your American flag. Is it true?" he asked me. "You're not kidding, are you? Is this really an American place?"

He had seven exhausted GIs with him, all former POWs liberated by the Russians and making their way on foot back to U.S. lines. From that day the house was like a U.S. Army Convalescent Center, but behind Soviet lines. Every day a dozen or more American soldiers and officers dropped in, rested a day or two, and went on.

The morning of May 20 a caravan of ambulances, jeeps and American staff cars (with two colonels) from the 76th Division drove up. They had come for a sick GI they knew about and were prepared for more. "We have no room in our hospitals for anyone but our own troops," the Russians had said.

With the GI in an ambulance, the caravan proceeded to the

town hall for an audience with the Red Army general in charge. I went along for the ride.

"General, I wonder whether there are other sick American or British soldiers in the area who had been POWs," the American colonel asked the Red Army officer. "We've come to take them back to our lines."

"This is the Soviet sector and not your affair," the Red general answered brusquely. "If there are any Americans about, we'll send them back."

The colonel disregarded the Russians' advice. We scoured the city. We found 35 sick American GIs in a former POW camp.

From that day on 76th Division staff cars came to our place twice a day to pick up incoming GIs. But I underestimated the Russians' suspicious nature. At 7 a.m. on June 28, 1945 my father and I left for the Western Zone for a short visit. We stayed away about ten days, and returned the evening of July 5. There were two cars parked in front. "Some more U.S. Army visitors," I thought. But as I got closer, I could see stenciled on the door panels large Red stars!

There was nothing to do except walk in. How serious could it be? As we came through the door an MVD captain walked up to us and shouted in Russian: "You are under arrest!"

The Russians had missed us by hours ten days before. They had come the morning we left, arrested the 12 GIs then in the house and taken them to MVD headquarters. My mother and brother were put under house arrest. Three days later a 76th Division colonel and a French officer were also arrested and interrogated for two days, then released. The GIs were still in jail. Our American flag had been ripped down by the MVD captain.

"Captain," I protested, "you know you have no jurisdiction over me."

"It's just routine, Mr. Noble," he said with a smile. "We have to check your papers a little further. Would you please come with me?"

Before I could answer, two bulky MVD guards were propelling me toward the door. A minute later I was on my way in a bumpy Soviet jeep to MVD headquarters in Dresden's Hausenstrasse.

The arrest left me stunned. I was taken before a Captain Pankov, a sullen man about 40 who walked with his head bent forward a little (a trademark of harried MVD officers). Pankov was in charge of Hausenstrasse.

He too studied my American passport. I protested over and over, "It's against international law." He just looked at the passport and half-heartedly muttered, "Our chiefs know what they are doing."

I was put into a small room with a sleep-in guard. No one spoke to me. On July 7, I enviously watched the 12 arrested GIs being returned to their division. Finally on the 21st I was taken before Pankov again. I jumped down his tight-tunicked throat.

"You have nothing to complain about," he said. "You are just a witness in your father's case. Your mother and brother have already been released. You will be released in three days. Meanwhile you will be held in Dresden prison."

Pankov's three days he knew were a lie. Days, weeks, months passed. From July 21 until December 29, 1945 I never left that cell for an instant. I lived in the same suit I was arrested in, without bath, shave or haircut.

"The whole thing's crazy," I said to myself. "They've never even questioned me or charged me with a crime."

I was in solitary confinement for 70 days. After a month, I began talking out loud, creating conversations. At the time it seemed natural. I think it happens to every man in solitary for a month or more. On the seventieth day a feeble old German, a former Communist, was put in with me. I was never so thrilled by the sight and sound of another human being.

The prison diet was carefully calculated starvation. Breakfast was bread and watery brown coffee. I had pea soup at noon and cabbage soup in the evening. Every day a few prisoners died of malnutrition. But the death rate obviously didn't impress the young MVD captain in charge who patrolled the halls with a whip at his side. On August 2 he decided to starve us to death.

Our bread and soup were replaced with coffee and water. The first two days the prisoners were sullen. On the third day the clatter began and by the fourth it was maddening. Men banged on the doors with their shoes and screamed: "Food, food! We

want food!" Dr. Ring, a former Red mayor of Chemnitz, who clanged his stool ferociously against the steel, was silenced by the eager MVD captain with 20 whip lashes across the back.

Then the clatter ebbed. Few longer had the strength to protest. Some of the prisoners were stranded near their cell doors, seated cross-legged, whimpering. They had exhausted their strength crawling to get their only food—coffee.

I stayed on my bunk, my water ration on a stool beside me, and took a sip every half hour to keep life going. All night I lay awake listening to the wailing prayers of the Moslem Red Army soldiers from Georgia held in the next cell.

Finally, on the morning of August 14, the thirteenth day, a guard opened the cell door and threw something down on my stool. It was two ounces of bread crumbs on a wrinkled piece of wax paper.

More than half the prisoners had died and others had lost their sanity or committed suicide. Starvation caused the water in the body to collect, and many were suffocated by horribly swollen neck glands. Fortunately only my feet swelled badly.

My deliverance came on January 6, 1946. Stepanenkov, the interpreter at my arrest, had himself been arrested for drunkenness and sentenced to a few months in Dresden prison. He was made trustee in charge of the prison workers.

He remembered me. "Noble—you're the American, aren't you?" he asked.

He put me to work cleaning floors, delivering food and assisting the prison doctor, jobs which brought me extra rations. As the doctor's assistant I worked in the prison hospital. We had no drugs, no anesthesia, not even a single aspirin. I used toilet paper for bandages. When a prisoner was brought in after a thorough MVD "interrogation," I picked the bits of torn shirt out of the tangle of blood and ripped skin on his back, while the man howled pitifully.

In March I was "promoted" and put in charge of 21,000 MVD records, from which I learned there were two other Americans in Dresden prison—a GI, "Junior" O'Connor, and a girl named Elizabeth Weitert, charged with being an American spy. By this time the former prison commander, the whip-happy MVD captain, was also a prisoner. He had been sentenced to a year for permitting thefts in the prison.

**A**fter 14 months I was summoned to the MVD wing at the other end of the prison for my first interrogation. My sullen old friend, Captain Pankov, faced me. I spoke before he could.

"I know you don't know what I'm talking about, Captain," I declared, "but there is such a thing as *habeas corpus* in the West. I'm an American citizen and you've been holding me against my will for fourteen months without a charge. I insist you notify the American authorities in West Germany immediately."

He looked up at me with the standard bored expression of all MVD interrogators (I believe they practice it) and passed over my complaints. Instead he asked questions steadily for 15 minutes. "Citizenship? Where were you born in America? Why were you arrested? Why did you fly an American flag in the Soviet sector? What were American officers doing in your house?"

When he finished, I asked in return, "When will I be released?" Pankov just waved me out.

Back in my cell, it really struck me for the first time that the Russians actually did think I had been running an intelligence center. They were afraid to charge me with being a spy only because it was so soon after World War II. I had searched for my own card among the 21,000 MVD records, but there was none. They obviously preferred that there be no evidence I existed.



Working in the washroom was like a new world. Twice a week the wives of the Red officials came in to bathe and stripped down to their panties in front of me.

I left Dresden prison a week later, on August 30, 1946. I was sent to Muhlberg concentration camp, then on to Buchenwald, the Nazi horror camp converted to Red use. Some of the Buchenwald inmates had been there before, jailed by Hitler as Communists. They had been freed by the Red Army in 1945 and were back again, this time as guests of their "liberator."

I spent four years in Muhlberg and Buchenwald. They were East German death mills. Three out of every four inmates died. I survived as best I could, and I got word now and then that my father in his prison was also managing to stay alive.

During this time the thing I feared most was shipment to Russia. "Every few months the healthiest men are sent as slaves to the Soviet," a friend told me. "As long as you are in East Germany you still have a chance to live."

On February 3, 1950 I was given a thorough physical exam and transferred with 60 other Buchenwald survivors to MVD headquarters in Erfurt, East Germany. Then in the middle of April our small group was shipped again, this time to Weimar prison, where my head was shaven.

The evening of August 8 I was called out of my cell and taken into a "courtroom." A Russian in a civilian suit was seated behind a long table between two tall candles. The table was covered with a red baize cloth, a sign of officialdom in the Soviet.

A young girl interpreter handed me a paper and a pen and told me to sign.

"How can I?" I protested. "I don't know what it is. I can't read Russian."

"This states," she said, "that a court was held in Moscow and that you have been sentenced to fifteen years of hard labor. You will be sent to the Soviet Union."

"For what?" I yelled when I recovered from the shock. "What is the charge? How can I be sentenced without a trial? I'm an American. You can't send me to Russia."

"Your sentence has been confirmed in Moscow," she answered. "If you have any questions, ask them at the camp where you are going."

Russia! Back in my cell I realized I had seen the Russians at their worst. I had been in charge of the MVD records in Dresden, another man on a grave-digging detail in Buchenwald, a

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third in the interrogation wing at Muhlberg. Exile to the Soviet was our reward.

"Now the American government will never find me," I groaned. My only hope was that my father might hear that I had been sent to Russia and on his release—if either of us was ever to be freed—notify the State Department.

Two days later I was taken to Lichtenberg prison in East Berlin by truck. At one point I could see the signs of the American sector just 150 yards away, and I wanted desperately to reach out and grab them. But an MVD soldier with a Tommy-gun was pointing the barrel right at my stomach.

A week after, at 11 p.m. August 17, 1950, I was roused out of bed and told to get my things together. A guard clamped handcuffs on me. I was loaded into a truck full of prisoners and driven to a railyard in a bombed-out section of Berlin. The moon lit up the Russian characters painted across the sides of a train.

I asked a companion what it said. "Postage," he answered. We boarded the train. A few minutes later the corridor door of the "Postage" car rolled back. It was actually a devilish Stolopinsky prison car, named after a Czarist Minister of State Security.

The Stolopinsky is a fiendish but efficient prisoner transport. Eight cages faced on a narrow hallway. Each cage had three wooden shelves nine feet wide. Fifteen of us were put in each cage, five on a shelf. I lay on my stomach, my body wedged tightly between two men, my head up against the bars looking onto the hallway. It was impossible to turn around. In fact I couldn't lift my head up more than a foot, for right above me was another shelf.

I was to eat, sleep and travel in this fantastic position for four weeks across much of Russia.

Once we started the routine never varied. Twice a day we were taken out to the toilet. We were fed dried bread and salty fish. I was afraid to eat the fish because I would need more water. Those who drank too much water couldn't control it.

"Guard, guard," one prisoner next to me called out. "I want to use the toilet." The guard ignored him.

The prisoner spat through the bars, then rolled over on his side and urinated in his shoes. It was fairly common. The Stolopinsky smelled to high heaven.

**A**t Brest-Litovsk, on the Polish-Russian border, I was one of 20 taken out, blindfolded and handcuffed, then transferred to another Stolopinsky, loaded mostly with Russians and Ukrainians. Our route through Russia covered 700 miles and passed through Baranovichy, the outskirts of Minsk, Orsha, Vyasma and finally Moscow.

Our first stopover was in Orsha, halfway between Brest and Moscow. We lined up in front of the station and it was obvious we were going to walk somewhere. It was going to be a pleasure after a week on our stomachs.

Our walk ended at Orsha prison. Waving from a balcony over the court yard were a dozen women prisoners, a self-appointed welcoming committee. They raised their skirts almost above their heads (some had no underclothes). According to a prisoner who translated for us, they yelled down foul oaths plus a chorus of invitations.

We stayed in the prison two days, then resumed our Stolopinsky tour. A few days later we arrived in Moscow, where we spent four days at the Red Press prison. Twice a day we were allowed on the roof, from which I could see the three-skyscraper skyline of Moscow (there are now nine).

From Moscow, still on our stomach, the faithful Stolopinsky took us northward 300 miles to Vologda, where waiting trucks carried us to the oldest prison in Russia, built by Empress Catherine. Thirty of us were put in a 20 x 10-foot dungeon.

The room was crawling with rats, big and brazen. "Don't bother them," a prisoner warned me. "If you miss killing them on the first stroke, they'll jump you."

As I lay in my wooden bunk, the ceiling just a few inches above my face, I did some thinking—and some dreaming. It was now September, 1950. I had been a Russian prisoner five

years. I had watched many men go mad and others commit suicide. I could still pride myself on my mental health.

No one had any rest for three nights until we left Vologda, on September 7, 1950. Fortunately the last leg of the trip was in a roomier prison boxcar and not the Stolopinsky. A week later we arrived at our destination—the slave camp of Vorkuta.

As I lay now on my shelf a year later, after an exhausting day's work at Mine 16, I thought how miserably I had handled myself in Vorkuta so far. I had survived five years in East German prisons remarkably well, but one year in Vorkuta had thrown me.

I tried to rationalize my 95 pounds of hungry, sick body. "It's a strange country," I said. "You don't know the language or the gimmicks. You're not used to the cold or to pushing a slate car. Give yourself time."

But I knew that wasn't it. "You haven't shown too many brains up here," I told myself realistically. "The lone-wolf idea is no good. Without friends and allies you'll never beat it."

Slowly I accepted the truth of what Vaska, a Ukrainian in my barracks, drummed at me. "Johnny," he said, "everything in Vorkuta depends on who you know. With enough *blat* (bribe) the guards and brigadiers will give you the right job. There are few Russians that can't be bribed. You need friends in the kitchen for extra food, and if you are one of a tight-knit group, not even the *blatnoi* will bother you."

He was right.

Learning Russian was my first survival project. My teacher was a barracks mate, Petrov, a former student at Moscow University. Without realizing it I had already picked up a few words on the slate job. I worked at learning every spare minute. "Soon you will speak better than many of the Ukrainians," Petrov told me.

**S**ince I had become willing to accept friends, my circle grew rapidly. Three prisoners, Vaska, Ivan and Alexia, and I became inseparable. Vaska, a 29-year-old Ukrainian peasant, worked the electric pulley on the slate heap. A fervent Ukrainian nationalist, Vaska fought with the Bandera Army during World War II against both Nazis and Communists.

Ivan 30, hated the Russians with a passion reserved for Ukrainians. Three million of his people died of famine in 1932 when they were hit by a severe drought. Red troops stole whatever grain there was and closed the border to keep the starving people from leaving. Both Ivan's parents had been deported to Siberia. He too had served in the Bandera Army.

Alexia was a Russian from Smolensk. He had been arrested in 1946 while a senior high school student and charged with "agitation," the standard term for anything from telling jokes about Stalin to intellectual deviationism.

My new friends made life a little more bearable. I shared in their meager food packages. Sometimes a friend in the kitchen could find a little extra fat to fortify my 95 pounds against the cold. When I went to the camp hospital later, my friends brought me bread saved from their own rations, for which I'll always be grateful.

Learning Russian dispelled another fear. The language is so harsh I always thought everyone was screaming at me. Actually the Russians are far from firm. They are masters of bluff—but when you stand up to them, they invariably back down.

Through my three pals and my new command of the language I met hundreds of other slaves. Vorkuta is a veritable League of Nations. We even had our own Who's Who of the Communist world. The former First Secretary of the Communist Party of Estonia was handing out food in the *stolovaya* of Mine 29. There were slaves who had been purged as deputy ministers of satellite countries, and regional leaders of the Communist Party itself. Gureyevich, a former Soviet diplomat, had been recalled from France by the Krenilin shortly after World War II and arrested by MVD agents as he stepped off the plane in Moscow. We had a former professor of history at the University of Leningrad, and many former university students.

Not everyone in Vorkuta was an ex-Red. In Camp 3 we had Poles who had served with the Allies in General Anders' Army during World War II. There were hundreds of Baltic people—Lithuanians, Latvians and Estonians, whose nations had been gobbled up in 1940 and made into Soviet republics.

There were slaves from Iraq, Iran, Italy, Mongolia, China, Czechoslovakia, and even two North Koreans. In Camp 3 alone there were 10 Greeks who had been taken prisoner by the Reds

during the Greek Civil War. One of my barrack mates was a young Hungarian, Janus. He had been arrested as a "western agent," allegedly for spreading potato bugs. There were hundreds of Germans, both Communist and Nazi, including some former SS troopers. We even had representation from France, and from England had come Eve Robinson, a good-looking blonde Englishwoman, about 30, who was in the women's camp.

A number of my fellow prisoners were clergymen. Practicing religion was one of the most serious crimes in Vorkuta. Possession of a Bible meant at least a month in jail, but religion flourished anyway. Some sects held services in an unused hallway of the mine—where no MVD guard would dare go.

On a free Sunday I sometimes attended Protestant services—in a different barracks each time. The meeting place was passed by word of mouth. It was dangerous, but only if two or more guards appeared. Individual guards pretended they saw nothing and walked away. Shivokas, a Lithuanian priest in my barracks, was arrested regularly and given two months each time in the *bor*, but he always returned to his work.

I was the only American in Camp 3, although I heard about other Americans in various Vorkuta camps. Among them were Privates William Marchuk and William Verdine, and Homer Cox and Leland Towers, all of whom have since been released by the Reds. I didn't meet Cox and Towers there, but I had ample cause later to be grateful to them.

I did have contact with a few men who called themselves Americans. One was Roy Linder, a prominent Vorkuta landmark. I met him in the hospital in 1950. Later he came over to my barracks fairly often to talk. We reminisced about Detroit (he had been a stunt flier at the Michigan State Fair) and about the States in general. Linder was very tall and balding, with a scarred chin that was twisted to one side, the result of a plane crash. According to his story he was born in Canada, but was an American citizen and a colonel in the United States Air Force. He claimed to have been one of our commanding officers at Tempelhof Airport in West Berlin.

He had been kidnaped by the Communists, he said, in West Berlin in 1949. After a year in Lubyanka prison in Moscow he had been shipped to Vorkuta. His story seemed convincing (except when he called himself "major" instead of "colonel"), but his short sentence of five years for espionage made me suspicious. He had a local reputation as a pro-Communist and seemed to have more freedom than other slaves. My friends warned me not to trust him—that he was, probably an MVD *stuckach*—informant.

"Don't worry, Johnny, I won't make any trouble for you," Linder once told me in an unguarded moment. Personally I believe he was a deserter from the United States Air Force, a former pro-Communist who had expected more of the Soviet. I think he feels he is in too deep ever to come home now.

There are definitely many Americans still imprisoned in the Soviet as slave laborers. I heard that an American engineer is held in Lubyanka. (According to new arrivals, so is Stalin's son, Lt. Gen. Vasily Stalin.) But a Yugoslav who had been imprisoned only 100 miles from Vorkuta told me startling news.

"I spoke with eight of your countrymen," he said. "They were American fliers who had been shot down over the Baltic Sea. One of them told me he was deathly afraid they would never get back to America. The Russians had reported them dead."

Prisoners transferred from camps in Taischet in Soviet Asia, Omsk in Siberia, and Magadan in the Far East said there were American GIs and officers from the Korean War working as slave laborers in the camps. They had been captured by the North Koreans, then shipped to the Soviet for captiveness.

I wondered whether the American State Department would ever hear about these men. But even more I wondered whether it knew anything about me. So far as I was aware, even as late as 1950 only my father was certain I was alive—and he was in prison. What I couldn't know was that in 1952 he had actually been released and had got home to Detroit. From then on he hammered on the State Department's door. He even got Representative Alvin M. Bentley of Michigan, a newly elected Congressman who had had experience behind the Iron Curtain, to pursue the case. But I was in Vorkuta, and I didn't know.

**A**s the only American in Camp 3, I became a combination museum piece and U.S. Information Service. I was known throughout much of Vorkuta simply as "The Amerikanetz." My fellow prisoners pounded me with questions. How does a worker live in America? How long does he have to work for a suit? Despite the Soviet's Iron Curtain, the slaves know America is the wealthiest country in the world. The shoes still worn in the Vorkuta area came from American war relief.

The Russians themselves admit the superiority. The first few months I was in Vorkuta a large cloth banner near our mine said: "Follow the example of American technology." All the admired electrical equipment in the mines was American.

Ivan and Vaska, my other close friends, had been Vorkuta slaves since the horrible days of 1946. Vorkuta's rich coal fields weren't exploited until 1942, when the Germans captured the Donbas coal region. By 1946 the Russians were expanding the area rapidly with slave labor.

Ivan told me about it. "They drove us here by truck. There was nothing here then, except the open tundra. They left us the truck, gasoline, a few guards and some food. We actually had to build our own slave prisons. Only the Russians could have such nerve. We took the truck and drove 200 kilometers back to the timberline. We cut down the trees ourselves, brought the logs to the Vorkuta sawmill, then cut wood for our isolated outpost.

"We lived in wood-lined holes dug in the ground. We ate American canned food sent for Russian troops. Only after we

TRUE MAGAZINE



"I think I've located the trouble right here!"

# I CHEATED RUSSIA'S WHITE DEATH

built a fence to imprison ourselves did they let us put up regular barracks. More than half the men died of exposure and overwork."

Vaska added, "You are lucky to be here now. You have a chance to live. Things are much more civilized."

I didn't feel very civilized. Despite the small increase in my food supply I was starving. One day a barracks mate, a Hungarian doctor named Shander, came over to my shelf.

"Johnny, did you ever eat a dog?" he asked.

Normally the thought would sicken me, but the last meat I had eaten was a 2-inch piece of tough reindeer meat two weeks before.

"How does it taste?" I asked greedily.

"Very tender and tasty—especially when it's roasted."

That night we went dog hunting. The dogs from the nearby *posiolki*, the settlements of the "free people," sometimes wandered into our camp. I was equipped with a thick stick and a stolen kitchen-knife. We waited near the main mine shaft. Suddenly Shander spotted a dog chasing around and beckoning to him. As the dog approached us, I swiftly hit him on the skull. He whimpered once, then fell into the snow unconscious.

"Give me your knife, Johnny."

Shander cut him open deftly, as if he were performing surgery, letting the blood run out on the snow. We cut the body up into pieces and roasted them on natural phosphorus in the mine waste atop my 60-foot slate mountain. After a hearty meal, we hid the remaining pieces under the snow at the corners of the mine office building.

We dug up a piece every few days and feasted with our friends.

Dr. Shander was a very resourceful slave and a valuable friend. We were all at the mercy of the *blatnoi* and the guards—except him. His weapon was a supposedly powerful sex potion. The polar weather tremendously reduced our sex drive. For some, like myself, it was a blessing. It was one less frustration in this hell-hole (not that all desire was gone!). But for the civilian mine officials with wives and girl friends, it seemed worse than death.

The incomparable Dr. Shander came to the rescue. From Georgian prisoners, who wrote their relatives for it, he got hold of a cactuslike plant. With this he made a drug that he sold in a series of fifteen injections for as much as 300 rubles (\$75). His customers, including the chief engineer, swore that it was a supreme aphrodisiac, but I was never convinced it had anything but money-making powers.

Sometimes I helped Shander give the shots, and he would reward me with a rabbit, which I devoured with relish.

Sex was openly for sale in Vorkuta to those who could afford it. For the 4,500 men there were ten women, mostly former prisoners who were now "free people." They worked the mine ventilators on the surface and earned 400 rubles a month, which wasn't enough to live on. For extra money they turned to prostitution. The standard fee was 25 rubles, plus an equal amount for the guard. Except for two attractive girls the women were typically Russian—built like trucks and just as tough. Their bodies were tattooed and they cursed with a vengeance, but that didn't seem to dampen their business.

An experienced fellow prisoner explained the prostitution system to me. "The meeting place is a platform behind the big fan of the ventilator. It's the warmest place in the mine. If a guard who is not bribed comes along, the customer scurries up to the roof through the trap door, and the girl explains that she was just sweeping out."

I had little opportunity to enjoy such diversions. My biggest fear after the first year was being sent to work down in the mine. In June 1951 that happened, when a Mining Commission from Moscow announced that the strongest prisoners—including 95-pound John Noble—were to work below. Quickly I went to see the Department Manager of Transportation, Comrade Kolozin, a young Communist civilian employe of the MVD.

"What can I do for you, Amerikenez?" he asked.

"I'm being sent below. I'd like to do transportation work down there. It would be better than digging coal."

"Anything would be better than that," Kolozin agreed.

Probably because I was an American—and as such, a minor Vorkuta V.I.P.—Kolozin transferred me to Mine Transportation. My job was coupling coal cars and guiding small trains through the narrow mine shafts.

Mine 16 was a precarious, primitive hole with no modern safety equipment. We suffered fatal cave-ins almost every week. The ceilings of the tunnels collapsed because the wooden shorings were spaced too far apart. There was enough wood, but the department managers sold a good deal of it to the Komi nomads and pocketed the cash.

My work was in the tunnels that connected the coal faces. The air smelled of gas, and water from thawing ice dripped constantly from the ceiling, soaking my *bushlat* through and through.

The tunnels average 5 feet in width. Coal car tracks took up most of the width except for a wooden trough along the edge for the dripping water. When a coal car came along I could sometimes press against the wall and watch the car pass within inches of my chest. Usually, though, to keep from being crushed I had to dive face first into the water-filled wooden trough.

My job was even more primitive. The brigadier, a Russian-German from the Volga Basin, explained my duties. "We have no automatic switches here, Amerikenez," he said. "You have to couple the cars into coal trains and throw the switches yourself."

He made it sound so simple. Actually I had to make up in daring what the Russians lacked in modern equipment. I rode at the head of a long train, standing on a car bumper, the flashlight on my pressed cardboard helmet scanning painfully for open switches. When I saw an open switch in time I jumped off, threw the switch, and raced for cover against the wall before the train could run me over. A few minutes later I waved the engineer of the locomotive 30 cars back to pick me up.

Sometimes I couldn't make the switch. Once my headlamp caught an open switch just three feet ahead. There wasn't time to close it, so I jumped off the train and squeezed desperately against the mine wall. When it hit the switch, the coal train piled up in a mass of cars and spilled coal. One of the cars crashed right across the shoring next to me, only inches away.

The mine was badly maintained. After throwing a switch, I saw that the steel "feather" connecting the rails hadn't closed properly. I rushed out and held the feather with my hand until the front wheels caught, then pulled back quickly. It was a risky move. In another instant my fingers would have been crushed. As the back wheels approached, I held the feather again, but when I pulled back this time my mitten was caught in the switch! I yanked my hand out of the glove just as the wheel rolled over it.

Nervously I repeated this little game for a few days. Then I asked my brigadier to report the faulty switch. I got a strange reaction.

"Leave well enough alone, Amerikenez," he said. "I tell the department manager what you said and you'll end up digging coal like an animal. The officials don't want to hear your troubles."

My switchman's version of Russian roulette began to disturb me, and I longed to get out of the mine. In February 1953 my new department manager, Chumboritsa, a Party member, made the dream come true. I had spoken to him about America and he remembered me.

"Noble—Amerikenez—how would you like to work upstairs for a change?" Chamborditsa asked one day. "There's an opening in the officials' washroom."

It was the nicest question anyone had asked me in seven years. I started working in the washroom the next day as an attendant. It was a new world. The washroom was the cleanest and warmest room in the mine. I worked 24 hours on and 24 off—sleeping through my day off the first month until the constant fatigue of the Vorkuta sleeping-sickness began to leave me.

The washroom was also an education in Soviet life. There are three kinds of "free people" in Vorkuta. I learned: civilian Red executives assigned by the Kremlin, Soviet workers who have come there for the "long ruble," the arctic bonus pay, and former slaves who have completed their sentences and are now in lifelong exile.

There were 20 "free people" in Mine 16, both workers and the Communist executives, among which were the chief engineer and his assistants, the department managers and the chief mechanics. I washed out their shirts and gave them towels for

their showers. On the night shift the young Communist executives came in just to keep warm. They were fascinated that I was an American. They tried to keep aloof, but the temptation was too much. We were soon good friends, sitting in the washroom talking through many of the cold nights. Often they would bring me leftovers from home, including delicacies like real cheese. It was all very wonderful.

The average free non-executive worker at Vorkuta I found completely dissatisfied with the Soviet Union. The workers weren't politically sophisticated, but they knew they just didn't make enough money. They lived in a *posialika*, a dreary little settlement in the shadow of the mines. Each family had one room and shared a communal bath and kitchen. "I make 800 rubles a month," one of the mechanics told me. "It takes at least 1,500 rubles to live. My wife works in Vorkuta too for 600 rubles, but it's still not enough."

From my Communist washroom companions I learned that it's the same all over Russia. Except for its executives and Stakhanovites (high-production workers), the nation is largely one of families living in one-room apartments and existing on sub-standard salaries. In a few cities like Leningrad and Moscow the workers do get as high as double the pay scale elsewhere in the country, but these too, live one family to a room.

It's far from a classless society. The director of our mine group, Bulbenkov, was paid 35,000 rubles a month—hundreds of times more than the average free worker. He and his wife paraded in heavy fur coats and drove a horse and buggy, a great luxury in Vorkuta. Bulbenkov called himself a "true Communist."

My greatest washroom pleasure was arguing with the seven young department managers, all graduates of Soviet technical schools. They are the elite of the Soviet. When I described America, their eyes opened like those of awed school children.

"Well, you may have prosperity in America, but it's only a bubble that will burst," one of them told me half-heartedly. "We may not get it for five generations, but then it will be permanent. Perhaps it is not so good here, but *budit*, *budit*—it will be, it will be." *Budit* is a key Russian word.

These seven young men had the most to gain from Russia, but three of them were already cynics about Communism. Their pay was 3,500 to 4,500 rubles per month, but they too were dissatisfied. One third went for income taxes and 800 rubles a month for compulsory "Social contributions." After necessities and vodka (at 50 rubles a bottle) they had nothing left. When I began getting 100 rubles a month they always borrowed from me.

The Communists openly admitted there is little freedom in the Soviet. The freedom these men missed most personally was the chance to quit one job and take another. They hated Vorkuta.

I played heavily on their doubts—doubts that were strengthened by foreign radio broadcasts. The average Russian three-tube radio can't reach Voice of America, BBC, or Radio Free Europe. But the Vorkuta department managers, as trusted MVD personnel, can buy short-wave radios. There is no Soviet law against listening to foreign programs. A number of the



"Your majesty, this is a wonderful opportunity to start a herd!"

managers confided to me that they often tuned in the West.

The washroom was not only an intellectual delight and a place to keep warm. It was also a bathing place for the wives of the Red officials, most of whom had no baths in their homes. They came in twice a week. Those two days quickly became the high spots in my life.

I gave the women soap and towels while they undressed right in front of me. They took off dresses, slips and stockings and stood around talking in brassières and panties. Only in the privacy of their common bathroom, however, did they strip completely.

**R**ussian women are exceedingly buxom and some of the young full-breasted girls are very attractive. The blonde wife of the chief engineer was especially well constructed, good-looking and immodest.

On the days the women came to bathe, the washroom was mobbed with workers and executives who flocked in on some pretext. They stood around watching the women disrobe, laughing and passing wisecracks with the girls.

"Ah, that one is—real nice," one engineer said about a partially nude bather. "I'm glad you think so," she flipped back with a wink."

I had my work to do, but it was a hell of a lot better than the mine.

On bathing days slaves outside stared at the women visitors as if they were from another planet. Once two prisoners climbed into the attic washroom and drilled holes in the ceiling directly over the women's bath. They spent a full week watching the nude girls cavort before they were caught and shipped to the *bor*.

Life in the washroom was easier than any I had known before in Vorkuta. In fact, conditions were improving for everyone a little. In 1952 we had started to get a small salary. Starvation and low morale had hurt coal production badly and the Kremlin hoped a few rubles might help.

My pay was now 400 rubles a month, out of which the camp took almost 300 for "room and board" and camp administration and another 22 as income tax to the Soviet government. I was

# I CHEATED RUSSIA'S WHITE DEATH

paying for my own imprisonment! The rest, 78 rubles, was mine to spend. It helped. In the canteen we could buy tea, margarine, sugar and marmalade for snacks. On free days we went to the town restaurant to buy extra soup or fish.

Many men used their salary for prostitution, others for alcohol (at 130 rubles a pint) which when mixed with tea was a powerful antidote for Vorkuta monotony. I drank this polar moonshine three or four times. It was quite a sight seeing decrepit slave laborers cutting up like kids. I liked the alcohol best with pineapple. On my 28th birthday Dr. Shander bought a pint for the occasion. I contributed a can of pineapple which had cost me 13 rubles (\$3.75), and we had a fine party.

The new Soviet plan worked in that coal production rose 20 percent, but it also backfired dramatically. With fuller bellies and an inkling of self-dignity, we began to think objectively about our rotten fate.

When I first came to Vorkuta everyone seemed to expect an imminent miracle of freedom. But as the years passed the slave camps began to seethe with discontent. We were fed up with the work, the cold, the *blatnoi* and the MVD *stukachi*. Most politicals were serving 25-year sentences.

Many of the guards and free people were also fed up with arctic isolation. "The MVD get six times a private's pay (then 30 kopeks—8 cents—a day) and many of them live in town with women and vodka," a Red Army soldier once told me. "We live here in barracks not much better than yours. This winter ten fellows have committed suicide already."

The Red Army looked on the MVD as glorified policemen, and the hostility often broke out into fistfights. Basically the Army enlisted men were sympathetic with us.

**T**here were isolated bits of sabotage. In Mine 16 a few students stole dynamite from the blasting department and blew up a mine shaft. Then from a prisoner who had been in Camp 2, I heard how 2,000 men had organized to clean out the *blatnoi*.

"We were almost rid of the tattooed monkeys," this slave told me. "Little by little the murderers were sent away and we had some peace. Then one day 100 more were brought in and split up five to a barracks. The first day one of the *blatnoi* put down his open hat and said, 'I want it choked with rubles when I return in an hour.' It was full. The next day the same, and again the next. Soon it was getting too much even for the cowards among us.

"We developed a plan. One night at a signal every barracks overpowered its *blatnoi*. We locked all 100 of them in an empty barracks, poured stolen gasoline over it and set it on fire. If not for the accursed guards who put out the flame, they would have burned in hell. But we were rid of them anyway. They were shipped out the next day."

But rebelling against the *blatnoi* and against the Soviet government were obviously jobs of different dimensions. Yet within a few months three closely related incidents were to set the stage for a violent uprising of 100,000 slaves—the first rebellion against the Soviet monolith in 35 years and one of the most significant political events of modern times.

The first incident was Stalin's long-hoped-for death on March 6, 1953. It sent a wave of frenzied expectation throughout Vorkuta.

"Maybe Uncle Zhorka (Malenkov, the new Premier) will close all the slave camps and free us," Vaska speculated. "What do you think, Johnny?"

I wasn't quite that optimistic, but I did look forward with a little extra hope.

On April 14, the birthday of the MVD head, Beria, he declared an amnesty for prisoners serving five years or less. But it was only a shallow bid for national popularity that didn't effect a single political prisoner. In all, 5,000 men were released from Vorkuta—mostly *blatnoi* and workers arrested for absenteeism. Eight hundred *blatnoi* were soon back after they had started a murderous crime wave in the town.

But in Camp 3 and Mine 16 life went on unchanged. We waited for some sign, but it never came. April and May passed.

Vorkuta grumbled and sabotage increased. We were ready for trouble. We needed only a spark.

It came in June—not one spark but two. Early in the month we heard of the arrest of Beria for treason. (He was eventually executed September 23.) The news of Beria's downfall rocked the local MVD. Every "Blue" from Derevyenko down expected to follow Beria. Our MVD detachment became openly split. Some admitted loyalty to Beria, others to Premier Malenkov.

Beria's arrest became a powerful catalyst. Slaves began insulting the administration. "We're cowards," one Estonian yelled out. "The Kremlin can't control itself, but a half million of us jump when they sneeze!"

On June 18 I heard even more startling news. Ivan came rushing over to my shelf. "Johnny, it's in *Pravda*. The East Germans have rebelled." I crowded around the copy of *Pravda* pasted on the wall. The story of the open fighting in the streets of Berlin was surprisingly candid. Every time the article mentioned the Berliners' resistance, we cheered. We discussed nothing else for days. (Months later some 200 heroes of that struggle, East Berlin teen-agers, arrived in Vorkuta as slave laborers.)

The next month we were cocky. We discussed striking for our freedom, but no one seemed to know what to do. The Russian group especially was unable to make a decision.

Fortunately it was made for us. The morning of July 22, when I walked into the washroom, one of the department managers spoke to me. "It's finally come, Amerikanetz. Mines 17 and 18 are on strike. Derevyenko himself went into the barracks and asked them to go back to work. They just laughed. 'When the barbed wire comes down,' they told him, 'we'll mine coal.'"

I spread word of the strike in Mine 16. All day more rumors kept coming in. The strike had spread to Mines 9, 10 and 25. There was more talk than work that day.

"Amerikanetz, do you think it's just more *parasha* (latrine rumors)?" one of the men asked me.

"A Red department manager told me in the washroom," I said. "He had no reason to lie."

The next day the skeptics were convinced. Mine 7 in the next camp had joined the strike. Later that day Mine-7 coal cars coming through our camp were three-fourths empty, and emblazoned in chalk inside each car in bold Russian letters was written: "TO HELL WITH YOUR COAL. WE WANT FREEDOM." There were signs pasted all over the cars addressed to us. "Comrades from Mines 12, 14 and 16. Don't let us down. You know we are striking."

Immediately we formed our own strike committee. Our strike leader was Gureyvich, the former Soviet diplomat. That night the strike committee came to see me. "We haven't decided when to go out with the others, Amerikanetz," they said, "but when we do, you will have one of the most important jobs. It will be up to you to convince the Red department managers not to interfere. They respect you as an American. No one has forgotten the equipment and food your country sent over during the war."

I found a chance to put the plan into effect the next morning.

**J**ust two weeks before, 50 boxcars of slaves had arrived in Vorkuta from the Karaganda slave camp in southeastern U.S.S.R. They were being sent north because of the acute labor shortage in Vorkuta (20 percent of us were now cripples). The Karagandas had been promised resettlement in Vorkuta as free workers. Instead they were classed as regular slaves.

That morning, July 24, the 200 Karagandas in our camp refused to work. The brigadiers finally induced our men to go into the pits, but they refused to work as long as the Karagandas were striking.

The impasse lasted until 1 p.m., when Gureyvich officially called the 4,500 men of Camp 3 out on strike.

One department manager in the washroom seemed pleased. "Well, Noble, I see you've got up enough courage to start," he said. I convinced him it would be better if he left and took the others with him. A few minutes later, after quiet persuasion on my part, the chief engineer and the other free people went with him. I had done my job.

Our strike slogan was: "Not an ounce of coal for the plan." A list of demands were drawn up: 1. Removal of the barbed wire. 2. Barracks to be kept unlocked at night. 3. Release of all political prisoners who have served 10 years or more in any Russian prison (I had served 9). 4. Thorough check of the trial of all political prisoners and release of the innocent. For the

others, new lower sentences in accordance with international law.

Printed strike demands soon were pasted up all over camp (we didn't have a printing press!). "I think we have valuable allies," one of the strike committee confided to me. I soon saw what he meant. I spotted an MVD guard coming out of our outhouse. I walked in after he left, and pasted high on the wall was a printed strike leaflet that hadn't been there a minute before. Some of Beria's loyal underlings were obviously using our revolt to foment discontent against the Malenkov regime.

**M**eanwhile, 30 of the Karagandas were arrested by Major Tchevchenko. Immediately Gurevich and 2,000 of us stormed down to the camp prison. We jammed in front and yelled. "Free the Karagandas!" Tchevchenko came out and tried to calm us.

"There is no reason for trouble, men. I promise that the Karagandas will be released before 6 o'clock tonight."

It was then 3:15 p.m. We decided to wait and see. A few minutes later a *Chornoi Voron*, a police wagon, drove up with 100 MVD and Army troops behind it in four trucks. They had come to take the Karagandas off to the central prison, out of our reach.

"*Sukinsin*," we cursed in unison. Shoulder to shoulder we rushed to bar the troops' way into the camp. Suddenly the Karaganda prisoners overcame their guards and dashed out into the yard. We set up a tremendous yell of jubilation. A second later the MVD lieutenant in command of the troops ordered, "Open fire!"

I was pinned against a building 50 yards from the troops, caught in a crossfire of submachinegun and rifle bullets. Pressing flat against the wall I mumbled a prayer. I could see that all the Red Army men and a few of the MVD had refused to fire. Next to the lieutenant a Red Army soldier had his tommy-gun pointed stubbornly to the ground. The officer impatiently grabbed it and started firing.

The firing lasted only 20 seconds, but it seemed like eternity. When it was over, fifteen of our men lay wounded on the ground. Two were dead.

We were enraged. Gurevich signaled his committee and walked to the front gate. Staring into the muzzles of 100 guns, Gurevich addressed Tchevchenko, Captain Bykov and the lieutenant in a commanding voice.

"The strike committee is officially relieving you of command of Camp 3," he said. "From this moment on we are in complete charge. No officers or guards will be allowed within the gate without permission of the strike committee. If the lieutenant and Molkov attempt to enter, they will be killed without a hearing. If you want to stop us, you will have to shoot all 4,500 of us. Meanwhile, not an ounce of coal comes out of the pits for the Leningrad factories."

We cheered our hearts out.

It worked. No one fired, no one raised a hand to stop us. Only the young woman *feldsher* was allowed in to care for the wounded. We rounded up three MVD guards and a senior lieutenant still lurking in the camp area and unceremoniously kicked them out. With a touch of courage our coal strike had been transformed into an uprising.

The Great Vorkuta Slave Rebellion of 1953 had begun.

We immediately formed what was for all practical purposes an independent slave republic. All the food in the *stolovaya*, the canteen and the restaurant was commandeered and higher rations were set for all. The prisoners in the *bor* were released. We appointed our

own police, but they were hardly necessary. Perfect discipline was maintained. The separate national groups became welded into one. Our morale, exhilarated with a fever of freedom, was fantastically high. We all would gladly have died to keep it.

A few free workers were permitted to keep the mine clear of gas and pump out excess water. But no coal was to be removed.

During the entire *mélée*, the once-fierce *blatnoi* sulked in their barracks like spanked youngsters. They couldn't understand what had turned their world upside down. Seven informers were dragged to the gate and thrown to the MVD. "We can't guarantee their lives in here," Gurevich told Captain Bykov.

We made our own flag, a plain red banner bordered in black in memory of our two murdered comrades. We raised it at half mast over the *stolovaya*. Fifteen minutes later, from the electric power station across the hill, a duplicate of our flag rose up a pole into the sun. A few minutes later it happened at Mine 7, then at 10. One at a time, as far as we could see, the new black and red banner of slaves-made-free replaced the Soviet flag over Vorkuta.

We kept in contact with the other camps through sympathetic free workers. Unanimously we agreed to deal only with the Politburo, the top Communist group in Moscow.

Insurrections had taken place in most of the camps. Their slaves, too, had driven the MVD out and taken control. In Mine 40, the largest and most modern in Vorkuta, a few men were shot defying the order to go to work. The electric-power station, the railroad camp and 35 coal camps had joined the uprising. Between 85,000 and 100,000 slaves were on strike.

**T**he MVD was split and the Kremlin was obviously cowed. "In the old days," one of the ancient *moujiks* told me, "Stalin would have crushed us if it took every slave's life." Fortunately these weren't the old days. The East Germans had rioted and although Beria was in jail, he had thousands of powerful allies still in the MVD. The Kremlin, paralyzed because of its own power struggle, was afraid to issue definite orders on how to handle the slave rebellion—other than with "extreme caution." We knew Malenkov's nervous new regime needed the coal badly and could not afford to have the uprising spread. It was wiser for them to hedge and see.

Late in the afternoon of the first day of the strike 300 soldiers were deployed around our camp in newly dug trenches. I could see machineguns and mortars being put in place. At 6:30 p.m. Captain Bykov requested permission to enter the camp and read a statement from General Derevyenko.

"As of yesterday, July 23, 1953," Bykov began (the veins in his thick neck stood out in embarrassment), "prisoners will receive up to 300 rubles a month. Bars are to be removed from the barracks, the barracks will no longer be locked in the eve-

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ning. Prisoners may receive visitors from home once a year."

Bykov added two more points. Slave numbers were no longer required on our clothing. Soviet citizens could mail letters once a month instead of twice a year. (As an American, I still couldn't send a postcard.)

Triple pay! No more bars! We cheered lustily. The rebellion was only a few hours old and the nervous administration had already granted important concessions. We rushed to the barracks swearing and yelling and ripped the bars from the windows with our bare hands.

"Come, Amerikanetz, give me a hand," one of the Ukrainians called, and we pulled the heavy iron lock off the door.

The next three days, July 24, 25 and 26, were pure bliss. Nature had joined forces with us and granted us a cloudless sunny sky. The temperature hit 70 degrees. Friends and I sat next to the camp fence soaking up the sun. A Red Army soldier asked through the gate, "What's going on?"

We told him about Derevyenko's concessions. "Good," he answered. "Don't worry, no Red Army man will ever fire on you."

Actually we were marking time, waiting for a Kremlin representative. So far Moscow had kept perfect silence.

On July 27 Derevyenko himself, a short stocky man of 50 with a gray-haired crew-cut, came to visit us with Jochtin, Minister of Internal Affairs for the Komi Republic, in which Vorkuta lay. They continued the kid-glove treatment. Derevyenko walked from man to man, talking in a fatherly manner.

"Don't you think it would be best to go back to work?" he asked. "You have won most of your demands. What more do you want?"

"We are waiting for the Kremlin," we told him.

Just before he left, Derevyenko admitted that MVD General Masslennikov, holder of the Order of Lenin and Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs for the entire Soviet Union, was flying up from Moscow.

The news was heralded as another strike victory, but many of us were worried. Masslennikov had a reputation for shrewdness and cruelty.

The next day, the 28th, we buried our two dead. Fifty free women from the *posiolik* were waiting at the gate to throw flowers on the funeral truck and 4,500 of us, wearing black mourning ribbons cut from our slave numbers, filed by in respect.

At noon on the 29th a friend of mine ran in. "Get up, Johnny! The Moscow general, Masslennikov! He's coming down the road!"

I ran down to the gate just in time to see a long black car drive into camp between two lines of heavily armed guards. Masslennikov got out, and the limousine made a U-turn and parked with its nose toward the open gate, in case of a hasty exit. Patrolling outside were 500 troops with mortars and machine guns.

Thirty officers, mostly colonels, followed Masslennikov to the field where we had set up chairs and a long table. They had come to hear our demands, and we were ready for them. The strike committee had chosen 20 speakers to give our viewpoint. All 4,500 of us assembled on the field facing the Kremlin brass. I had a choice position up front.

It was the most stirring and historic scene I had ever witnessed in my life. First, Gureyevich presented our demands—stressing freedom for all men who had served 10 years. Then one man at a time stepped out to speak—lowly slave laborers pouring out their bile about Red indecency to one of the Soviet's mightiest.

The speeches were moving, intelligent and biting. A former professor from Leningrad traced the history of slavery from pre-Pharaoh times, through the slave trade on the Gold Coast, to Vorkuta. A decorated former Red Army officer told how he had been wounded 17 times before being captured by the Nazis—for which he was now serving a 20-year sentence.

"Now," the officer said, "I have come to the conclusion that Communism breeds slavery."

We cheered every word. "Vot! Vot! That's it! That's it!" I yelled with the others.

Masslennikov listened with his head bent forward for over an hour. He was shocked. In 30 years of Bolshevism he had never before heard such words. He never spoke, except to interrupt occasionally, "Remember, you are insulting the great Soviet Union."

Masslennikov left without making any promises. Next day he completed his rounds of the striking camps without making a dent in the strikers' unity. Then on the morning of August 1, exactly three days after our meeting with Masslennikov, I saw something very strange. The men of Mine 7 were being taken from camp out into the tundra in small groups under heavy guard. After 30 groups had been assembled, they started to return to the camp, one group at a time.

An hour later I found out what had happened. The MVD had let the first group go back without a word. "You see," they said to the second group, "these men have agreed to return to work. Will you follow their example and report to the pits, or do we have to shoot you all right here?"

That broke the strike in Mine 7. The MVD troops who accomplished it were not from Vorkuta. They were part of a special guards battalion of 1,200 MVD men brought in to quell the rebellion.

At 9 a.m. General Masslennikov drove up to our gate and asked for Gureyevich. The special battalion was deployed on the tundra in battle formation. "You can see the elevator wheels are already turning in Mine 7," Masslennikov said. "It would be wisest to follow their example. The ultimatum is work or death."

Gureyevich pondered a few seconds. "Give us 24 hours to think it over," he said. The General looked at him distrustfully but answered, "Agreed."

As events turned out, Gureyevich's diplomatic stall saved our lives.

From our camp Masslennikov and his troops moved up the road to Mine 29. We were cut off from events for an hour. Then at 11 o'clock we heard a violent outburst of gunfire that lasted two full minutes. Shortly all camp doctors were called to Mine 29. Masslennikov had broken the back of the rebellion with a blood bath.

Later I heard what happened. The General had driven up to Mine 29 backed by his 1,200 troops. Packed by the gates were 2,500 slaves, their arms locked. The Ukrainians were singing their national songs.

"Go back to your barracks!" Masslennikov barked. "Follow the example of Mine 7. They are working the pits." The crowd yelled insults instead and pushed closer to the fence.

At Masslennikov's hand signal a squad of troops pushed open the gates, but as the prisoners walked toward them defiantly they turned and ran. A few minutes later two giant fire hoses were pushed through the fences. Four bulky Ukrainian prisoners twisted the nozzles out of shape.

"I warn you. Go back to your barracks!" Masslennikov ordered again.

When no one moved, the MVD chief decided to try psychological persuasion. "All those who want to return to work, come outside the gate."

Every prisoner's eye swung in a circle and glared as 50 men of the 2,500 walked out. Masslennikov looked disgustedly at them and snapped, "Get back in!"

He called out the third time. "End this rebellion now. Organize yourselves to work. This is the last warning I will give you!"

Even before Masslennikov had finished, the slaves we're chanting back, "To hell with your coal! If you won't give us freedom, we'll take it ourselves!"

As the prisoners stood by the gate the heavy machine guns 20 yards from the fence and the massed infantry opened fire. The gun roar bit through the screams of the wounded until no one was left standing. Blood was over everyone. Near the gate lay 110 prisoners, killed instantly. More than 500 were seriously wounded. Masslennikov ordered the gates opened and barked orders to the living to come out. Those who still refused to work would be killed on the spot. The survivors wailed as they stepped over the bodies of their fallen comrades.

The next day we too returned to work. Then one at a time, an hour or so apart, the rest of the camps surrendered to the MVD. By late afternoon the uprising was over.

## A. True Book-Length Feature

Within the week the MVD made up for its indecision during the strike. In all, 7,000 Vorkuta slaves were arrested, 300 from my camp. Three MVD officers and two guards from Camp 3 were charged with helping to inspire the rebellion. Colonel Burtiev, Derevyenko's assistant, was himself discharged from the MVD.

Of those seized, 300 were executed without trial. A thousand men were transferred to the Far East, and the rest were given additional 3 to 5 year sentences. I never again saw Gurevich or the other strike leaders. During the bloody retaliation I worried myself sick, waiting to be taken in. But those on the strike committee who knew my role met their fates without incriminating me.

By Western standards, I presume, the rebellion was a failure. We had struck for freedom and we were still slaves. But the mere fact that a rebellion took place at all in the Soviet Union made it a glorious success. In those ten days we 100,000 slaves showed the Kremlin that Russia's internal solidarity is a sham, a carefully poised egg that must be handled gingerly.

Vorkuta never quieted down. In February 1954 a section of the office building in Mine 7 was blown up by a homemade bomb. In our mine the MVD found 400 sticks of dynamite ready to blow up the main elevator shaft.

Shortly after that the MVD executed a planned shift to weaken our prisoner organizations, and I was moved into Mine 29, the scene of the massacre. The men proudly showed me their scars and the bullet holes that gaped out of every wall.

At this point I had lost all hope of a release before the end of my term. During the strike I somehow expected a wildly careening chain of events that would end up with me a free man back in Detroit. But that dream was over, and there were 11 years left to my sentence.

True enough, two of the Americans there, Homer Cox and Leland Towers, had been released in January 1954, but their going had nothing to do with me—or so I thought. Yet they were to provide the key which finally let me out.

Once back in the States, Cox and Towers reported directly to the State Department what they knew of Americans held in the Russian slave camps, and in particular what they had heard of John Noble, who was a slave in Vorkuta. For the first time the State Department knew definitely where I was and that I was alive. It immediately sent a forceful note of protest to Molotov's office, and this time there was to be no nonsense about the Russians having no knowledge of me.

I wasn't allowed to send a postcard to my folks in the U.S., but early in 1954 I had a glimmer of hope, for I finally succeeded in mailing one out over the name of another prisoner. When my father received it back in Detroit, he first called the State Department and then rushed with the card to Congressman Bentley. It was concrete evidence that I was alive, and where.

One day early in June 1954 I was eating my cabbage soup in the *stolovaya* when my barracks master rushed in excitedly . . . "Amerikanetz, the camp commander is looking for you. You have orders to proceed to Moscow." I looked up at him and laughed. A few minutes later another friend came in with the same news.

I rushed nervously to the administration building and stood at attention before MVD

Lieutenant Antrashkevich. The lieutenant looked at me sourly and said:

"You are to leave for Moscow at 7 a.m."

My mind spun like a top. That could mean anything.

"Why Moscow?" I asked, and despairingly thought I was simply being transferred to another slave area. But even then, in the back of my mind I hoped that at least I was finally going to get a real trial.

"As far as I know you're going home," Antrashkevich said.

The next morning, my meager belongings slung over my shoulder, I was taken to Camp 15. Outside the gate a fellow slave was repairing the fence.

"*Te takzhe Amerikanetz?*" (Are you also an American?) he asked.

I nodded.

"We have two of your countrymen here who are also going away."

A few minutes later I met U.S. Army Privates William Marchuk and William Verdine. On the way to the train station in an MVD car we talked our heads off. It was a pleasure to speak English again. Marchuk told me he had got drunk in a bar in Berlin and wandered across the Red border. Verdine said he had been kidnaped while on duty at the demarcation line. (Marchuk has since been convicted by the U.S. Army of "desertion" and "affiliating" with the Soviet secret police, and sentenced to 12 years.)

At the Vorkuta station I walked right up to the parked Stolopinsky.

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"I'd like to cut down on my house calls, but it's hard to say 'no' when people really need my help."

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"No, no, Amerikanetz," the MVD officer said. "That's not for you any more."

The three of us, without handcuffs, traveled with two MVD officers in a civilian train from Vorkuta to Moscow, where, after an uneventful two-week stay at the modern Burtirskaja prison, we were taken to a camp in Potma, some 300 miles farther southwest.

Potma was a repatriation camp! I was not made to work there, and with the help of European Red Cross packages my 95-pound frame took on 40 pounds more. They must be fattening me up for something, I thought. But when month after month passed again and nothing happened, I almost lost hope.

Meanwhile, as I found out later, things were humming back in Washington. The State Department had answered Congressman Bentley that they had just recently found out I was in Vorkuta and they were forcefully pressing for my release. But my father begged the congressman to do something more dramatic—to take it up directly with the President.

The first week in September 1954 Congressman Bentley spoke with Presidential aide Earle Chesney. Bentley laid out the facts of the case. On September 10 he received a call from the White House. Chesney had taken it up with President Eisenhower, and our Ambassador in Moscow, Charles Bohlen, was being notified to discuss my case immediately on a person-to-person basis with the Kremlin. The Russians now finally admitted knowing I had been in Vorkuta.

Suddenly on January 3, 1955 I was sent back to Moscow, where I was given the Soviet VIP treatment. I was presented with a new civilian suit and barracked with Marchuk in a fine home (the first real bed in 9½ years!).

That afternoon a special delegation from the Kremlin itself came to see us. I jumped when I saw it was headed by General Masslennikov, the butcher of Vorkuta.

"You will leave for Berlin tomorrow, Mr. Noble, where you will be turned over to American authorities," Masslennikov said. "Meanwhile you will be shown Moscow by one of our officers."

I was really going home to Detroit! And of all the irony, I was hearing it from Masslennikov. I felt deliriously happy, but I controlled myself in front of the Russians.

Masslennikov shook my hand. "By the way, where were you in the Soviet Union?" he asked casually.

When I said, "Vorkuta," the color drained from his face.

"In which mine?" he asked, trying to maintain composure.

"Mines 16 and 29," I answered. I was enjoying the game.

He squinted at me nervously, then went on. "Do you recognize me?"

"No," I lied.

"Did you take part in the strike?"

"Certainly," I answered proudly. "We all did."

I spent the rest of the day seeing Moscow. (I was not particularly impressed. Some of the main streets look much like the West, but going 100 feet off a main thoroughfare is a trip back to the 18th century.) The people who had abused me for 9½ years were now treating me as if I were a visiting schoolteacher on a summer vacation.

The next day Marchuk, and I were chaperoned by an MVD colonel, boarded the famous Blue Express from Moscow to East Berlin. Along the way I thought how differently I was making the trip this time. In 1950 I had covered the same route on my stomach in a stinking Stolopinsky. Now I was having a 25-ruble dinner on a white tablecloth in the dining car, courtesy of the MVD.

As I found out later, Ambassador Bohlen's direct contact with the Kremlin had made the difference. While I was losing hope in Potma, in December, 1954, the State Department had notified Congressman Bentley that my release was imminent. In fact, a few repatriated Austrians who had met me in Potma had reported my new whereabouts to the U.S. government. Now I was on my way home. Why the Reds released me they didn't say, any more than they ever gave a reason for arresting me.

The Blue Express brought us into East Berlin at 2:50 p.m.

on January 8, 1955. Fifteen minutes later I was in a room in Karlshorst, Soviet East Berlin headquarters, where I was soon joined by a U.S. Army liaison officer and two State Department officials, one of whom signed a receipt for me. The Russians then turned me over to the Americans. Outside, I skipped down the steps into a State Department car that drove me to West Berlin—and freedom.

"Well, how does it feel to be back?" Mr. Pratt of the State Department asked.

I thought of Vorkuta, then looked out the car window at the passing scenes of the Western World. It was as if I had spent 9½ years in another world, on a fierce and distorted unknown satellite of the earth.

"I could not express it in words, Mr. Pratt," I answered truthfully.

At 1:30 a.m. the morning of January 17, I landed at Idlewild Airport, where I saw my family

again—my mother and brother, who had started the fight for my release back in 1945, and my father, who had served his own unjust prison term and then joined the fight when he could.

I haven't forgotten a thing that has happened and I never will. My body is still surprisingly healthy after such abuse. Only my bottom teeth are loose enough to fall out, and I have an enlarged liver from too much cabbage soup.

Since I've been back, people have asked if I have drawn any conclusion from my experience in the Soviet. I have. I saw the sham of Soviet internal strength exposed as a myth. Not that revolution is coming tomorrow or in the next decade, but the summer slave rebellion in Vorkuta gave heart to 20,000,000 slaves in 250 regions all over the Soviet—and food for thought for Russia's 85,000,000 free workers who have never dared to strike.

Our historic rebellion had two powerful allies: the summer sun that melted the snow and the power struggle that rocked the Kremlin. The summer comes every year, and I believe we will see many more paralyzing fights among the Soviet leaders seeking Stalin's mantle. I'm sure that some summer those I left behind in Vorkuta will set another glorious example for the enslaved peoples of the world.

—John H. Noble and Martin L. Gross

TRUE MAGAZINE



"Yes, this is Joan speaking."

A True Book-Length Feature