

*Maxim Osipov*  
**Moscow—Petrozavodsk**

*Mark well, O Job,  
hold thy peace, and I will speak.*  
Job 33:31

To deliver man from his neighbours – isn't that the function of progress? And what are the joys and calamities of humankind to me? That's right – nothing at all. Then why is it that I can't have any time alone, not even when I'm travelling?

They asked us: Who's going to Petrozavodsk? A conference. An international conference. Come on, doctors, someone has to go! Yes, we know what these conferences are like. A couple of emigrés – that's the "international" for you. The short bout of drinking, the hotel, the lecture, the long bout of drinking – then back home again. After the lecture, you're still answering questions, but behind your back, brawny little red-faced men are pointing at their watches – time's up. These little men are the local professors – in the provinces these days they're all full professors, the same way that a white man in the American South is either a judge or a colonel.

Well then, who's going to Petrozavodsk? So I volunteered: Lake Ladoga? Alright – why not?

“Not Ladoga. Onega.”

What's the difference? Have you been to Petrozavodsk? Neither have I.

The station is a pretty frightening place. For my own protection I assume the air of a veteran traveller. I walk to the carriage pretending I'm bored, so that it's immediately obvious I'm no stranger to railway stations – no point trying to rob someone like me.

The train from Moscow to Petrozavodsk takes fourteen and a half hours, incidentally. Your fellow travellers are almost invariably a source of unpleasantness: beer and *vobla*, cheap cognac – “Bagrations” and “Kutuzov” – pouring out their hearts one moment, picking a fight the next.

The train begins to move. Everything's okay – for now I'm alone.

“Tickets please.”

“Excuse me,” I ask the conductress, “but could we reach some sort of ... I mean ... so I can have the compartment to myself?”

She looks at me. “That depends on what you're going to do in it.”

What is there to do in it?

“Read a book.”

“In that case, just 500 roubles.”

Suddenly, these two turn up – they had all but missed the train. They take the two lower berths. There they sit, panting. Just what I needed! This is not the sort of trip I had in mind. Damn it. Go on then, make yourselves at home – I won't get in your way. I climb to the upper berth and turn my back to them; they go on busying themselves down below.

The first one is simple, primitive looking. His head, his hands, his boots – everything is big and crude. He sits with his jaw hanging open, like a moron. A sweaty moron. He has his phone out and he's playing a game. *Trrrink-trrink* for wins, and if he loses – *bllllum*. With his

free hand he's tugging at a zipper – yet another noise. And he's sniffing. Still, at least he's probably sober.

Below me, the second one says with disgust: "Take off your jacket, you halfwit." He's irritable. "Stop that *shnuffling!*"

It's hard going. The sound of the train wheels. The phone below me going *trrrink-trrrink*. And I'm supposed to read a book in this din? It won't be like this all the way to Petrozavodsk, will it?

I step out into the corridor. I can hear them talking in the next compartment. "Russia is one of the oblong countries," says a pleasant young male voice, "unlike, let's say, the USA or Germany, which are round countries. I have, by the way, lived in both for some time." A young woman makes a delighted sound. "Russia," continues the voice, "is like a tadpole. You can go only from east to west and west to east, apart from body of the tadpole, which is relatively densely populated, and in it it's possible to go from north to south and south to north."

This is to the left of my door; to the right, they're drinking. Pulling apart a chicken, splitting tomatoes with their hands, the men are clinking glasses and roaring with laughter.

I return to my own compartment. My god, the time is passing slowly – we've only just left Moscow.

Half an hour passes, then an hour. Soon we'll reach Tver. *Trrrink* goes the moron. The second one springs to life.

"Turn off the sound."

"But To-ol ..."

Tolya, apparently. He's tall, probably six and a half feet. Fingers long and white, nails rounded. His face is ordinary enough. Thin-lipped. But it's as if he doesn't have a face. I'm not sure how to explain it, but there's something about Tolya I don't like. I'm not picking up any signals from him – that's what. *Anaesthesia dolorosa* – the painful loss of sensation. You can brush your hand against something but you can't tell whether it's smooth or rough. Am I being too critical? He's sober, he's courteous, and he's trying not to bother me.

"Newspapers! Get your newspaper, fresh from the press."

*Merci!* Oh yes, we know your newspapers. Female tennis star poses nude for journalists. Tragedy in a lady TV presenter's family. Billionaire's daughter abducted. Secrets for a flatter stomach. Crime pages. Colour pictures of the dead. Pah! But Tolya takes a paper, rustling its pages down below. After a while he says to the moron: "Let's go."

I'm left alone for a while. Some trip this is.

Before everyone turns in for the night, there are a few other minor incidents.

First, some tanked-up bloke wanders in from the compartment next door where they're drinking. In his hands there's a camera. He opens the door and makes to take a picture. Tolya starts at him, and then, just like that, he turns away, hiding his face. So, that's it ... He's FSB. A Chekhist. Now I get it.

The drunk pulls me to his compartment – I'd just been on my way to brush my teeth. I am to photograph him with his friends. I take a picture. Is that enough? No, not yet. I must also listen to the story of his life. He all but falls upon me: vodka, sweat, tobacco – there, breathe deeply! People ought to maintain a certain distance from one another. Like in America.

His mother in her day had given him 100 roubles to buy himself a camera. Then she'd taken the money back again – she'd needed it. But he'd really loved photography, ever since he was little. "Just my luck, eh?" he says.

I express my sympathy. I'm going now.

"Wait!" He'll read me a poem – a really cool poem.

“Pardon,” I say, “Nature calls. I’ll be back.” I barely make my escape.

“Out o-o-on ... the tundra! Out o-o-on ... the railroad!” he begins caterwauling, throwing open his arms to embrace anyone who can’t get out of his way.

Clearly I could have worse travelling companions. So what if Tolya is FSB? At least he’s quiet and he doesn’t stink. And he keeps his distance – he’s squeamish, like me.

Second, we can no longer use the nearest loo: someone has stuffed the toilet bowl to the rim with newspapers. Sodden colour pictures. Why?

Third, the water for tea is only lukewarm, and possibly not boiled at all.

“Just like the bloody Soviet Union,” mutters Tolya.

No, not FSB.

The overhead light goes out. Try to get some sleep. What’s the link between those two? Nothing good, that’s for sure. Not relatives, not colleagues. Maybe they’re queer? Who knows? And what is it to me? Maybe they are queer. Among simple people it happens more than we think.

And then there are those sounds: *tuk-tuk*, *sniff sniff*. I feel sorry for myself. I fall sleep.

I fall asleep and sleep unexpectedly deep and long, and when I awake, awaiting me are the early sun, the snow and a very cold morning outside the window, judging by the frost on the spruce trees.

Without looking at my companions, I leave the compartment. The train has come to a stop. We’re at Snyt ... or at least I think so, although I can’t quite make out the sign. Another reads: “... use toilet during stops”. Okay, so I’ve got to wait a while for the loo. But it’s only a couple more hours until the long-awaited Petrozavodsk, the hotel, the hot water, the dinner with wine. My spirits are much improved. I shouldn’t get so uptight – life’s too short.

My neighbours are ready to go. Tolya clearly never went to bed at all. He’s sitting by the window, agitatedly turning his head this way and that.

“What’s going on? Why are we just standing here?”

“I think we’re at Snyt,” I say. “Snyt station.”

“What’s that? Sery, where are we?”

“Svir. We’re here for half an hour.” Sery now cuts a far better figure. No sniffing, no juvenile games.

Sery leaves, and the train gets going. Somehow or other I manage to wash my face and drink some hot tea. I begin to feel even more cheerful. I want to live: have my breakfast, play the joker, gossip about the Moscow professors, charm the young women doctors. We aren’t running behind schedule, are we? I go round and ask. Apparently not.

But what’s up with my neighbour? Now, alone and in the light of day, it’s Tolya who is a sorry sight.

“Tolya, are you okay?”

“What?” He turns towards me.

My god, the whole of his body is trembling. I’ve seen this many times: towards the end of the first twenty-four hours in hospital, the patient will begin to tremble. He’ll start driving away devils or else make a dive for the window ... Delirium tremens! It’s as simple as that. Tolya is an alcoholic.

I yell for the conductress. “This passenger is suffering from delirium tremens. Do you understand? Alcoholic delirium. Have you got a first aid kit?” No, there’s no first aid kit. It really is all just like the Soviet Union! I’m supposed to go and find the train manager! Fat

chance of that – where am I going to find him? “Give him some wine or something; I’ll pay – otherwise he’ll wreck the whole train!”

“Calm down, passenger,” says the conductress. “Where’s his friend?”

“He got off at that Sviri, Sveri – whatever it’s called.”

“Why did he get off there? He has a ticket to Petrozavodsk!” She starts shouting. “He’s blocked up the loo with his newspapers! A whole big bundle of them! Wasn’t there enough toilet paper for him?”

What does the loo have to do with it? A passenger is unwell. It’s her job to show assistance, not to pitch a fit. By now he’s probably banging his head against the wall. But it’s too late – she’s off on a rant:

“We’ll deal with your compartment right now, passenger. We’ll have him removed from the train!” She dashes off somewhere. Damn, but I’m afraid to go back into the compartment. I stand by the door and wait.

Pyazh Sielga station, the last stop before Petrozavodsk. A policeman is waiting. Yes, this one will set matters straight. I, with my PhD in medicine, can’t deal with the problem, but he will. Yes, Comrade Dzerzhinsky has a nose for the truth<sup>1</sup>.

“Your documents.”

He barely even looks at my documents. But there’s something awful going on with Tolya: he’s climbed onto the little table and begun pounding at the window with his boot. It doesn’t break with the first blow, but break it does: and there are shards of glass, cold wind, and blood. Everything happens fast. The policeman is beating Tolya’s legs with his rubber truncheon, and Tolya is hanging there, hands clamped to the upper berth. Then he crashes to the floor. How they drag him out of there, I don’t see – the conductress has led me to the next compartment, to the pleasant young man and the young woman.

For no less than a minute they’ve been beating Tolya outside our window – a man had run up in a tracksuit, too lightly dressed, it seemed to me, and still more policemen. They’re beating him with their black truncheons and they’re beating him with their fists. This is how we in Russia treat delirium tremens – not, we have to admit, the most uncommon of ailments. Do I have to describe the beating in detail? The police have a name for it – forceful apprehension. At one point I think I heard the crunch of bone, although what can you hear, really, through a double thickness of glass?

They’re beating him and saying something; it even looks like they’re asking him questions. And they’ve dragged in Sery from somewhere or other and they’re beating him, too. Sery immediately falls to the ground and curls up into a ball, tucking his head in. With Sery they’re not trying so hard. They’ve worn themselves out, these servants of law and order.

We observe all this through the window; then the train gets going again.

“How ghastly!” the girl cries.

Why did we ever let her watch?

“It’s horrible! I do not – I absolutely do not – want to go on living in this country!”

“That’s just what I was saying,” the young man remarks. “But there’s no point weeping and wailing about it. That, in my view, is *counterproductive*.”

I do not immediately grasp what I’ve brought about. It’s the same after a fatal mistake in hospital – for a while you just stare, stupefied, at the patient, at the monitors, at your colleagues.

“They suit each other perfectly,” says the young man, continuing the conversation, “both the victims and the victimisers. If they went and beat up a professor at Berkeley that way, he’d hang himself from the shame of it. But these two, they’ll get up, shake the dirt off and be better in no time.”

“What about you?” I ask. “What would you do?”

“Me?” He smiles. “I’d leave.”

I don’t believe the three of us are giving much thought to what we’re saying.

“Why not leave,” the girl puts in, “before you get beaten up? A normal person shouldn’t have to live here.”

My new companion smiles again.

“How would I have endured this trip without my sweet fellow traveller? This train hasn’t even got a first-class carriage.”

I look around. It’s strange – the compartment is the same as mine, yet here everything breathes of order and wellbeing. The young man gives off a scent of good-quality eau de cologne. Yes, he’s also bound for the conference. Formerly a doctor, in his present incarnation he’s a publisher – he publishes journals (“like Pushkin”) – he’s president of some association, and much more besides. On the little table stands a half bottle of “Napoleon”. And the girl really is very sweet.

“You need a glass.” The little glasses he has with him are made from some kind of stone. Onyx, perhaps jasper. Stone glasses. Yes, it is very good cognac indeed.

The young man is explaining why he’s not yet left: Culture.

“Let me put it this way. For my American friends, the letters AAA suggest ‘American Automobile Association’. But what do we associate with three A’s?” He pauses for a moment. “Anna Andreevna Akhmatova!” He looks at us triumphantly and adds, “Yes, and *businesses*.” That’s what he said. *Businesses!*

How good it is to warm yourself with a spot of cognac when you’ve brought about the misfortune of two people!

“You’re absolutely right,” agrees the young man. “This isn’t our country, it’s their country.” Had I really said something of the kind? “Remember, it’s not you and I who hired these people to protect us. What’s happening here is a particular kind of negative selection. As a result, within the existing system a humane cop isn’t possible! The system would just spit him out. So what can we do? Change the system. Or withdraw into a world of our own – internal emigration. Or, if the worst comes to the worst,” he shrugs his shoulders tragically, “*downshifting*”.

I catch the girl’s eye. Erm, yes ... *Downshifting*.

There is a rap at the door: “The train will arrive in fifteen minutes.” Time to go back to my compartment for my things; the pleasant young man will help me. I thank him.

In the wrecked compartment a very important discovery awaits me: I learn who Tolya and Sery are. Beneath the bench, next to my small suitcase, are two enormous checked bags, the kind carried by only one type of person – the petty trader. Now I begin to understand the strange friendship of my travelling companions – people of all sorts become petty traders. I also understand their horrific beating.

“The competition was settling scores,” the young man agrees. “It was a contract job.”

“But why try so hard if it’s only a contract?”

“For the pleasure of the soul. I’m telling you, cops aren’t human.”

Petty traders. My companion has an opinion on their line of business, too.

“They carry out an important social function, you know,” he says in his handsome voice. “All of us, everyone in our society, suddenly we all began to want the same things – expensive clothes, Rolex watches, whatever. But if you can’t afford a Swiss Rolex,” – here he flicks his left wrist – “those traders of yours – whatever you call them – they’ll sell you a Chinese Rolex, or any other kind you want. After all, they tell the time, they’re watches too. And they look good.”

What heavy bags they are! What am I ever going to do with them? Give them to the conductress? No way is that witch going to get anything from me! The young man shrugs his shoulders and I drag the bags out into the corridor.

“Could you give me a hand?”

“I’ve got an idea,” he says. “Give me your suitcase. I mean, what would I look like carrying those dreadful trunks?”

Okay, thanks. I want to make him happy, so I say, “You have such a lovely travelling companion!”

“Ah, get off!” he says, “She’s not much to look at. I’d rate her seven and a half.”

Something makes me check: “Is that on a scale from one to ten?”

“No,” he laughs, “to seven and a half! And her head is absolutely *topsy turvy*. You know what I mean? Upside down!”

I’m glad he hasn’t got anywhere with her. It’s strange how it bothers me in a situation like this, but it would have been just too much to bear if he and I had spent our nights as differently as all that.

The conductress lets us off the train without any sign of emotion. Someone comes to meet the young woman and we tell her goodbye and wait for a porter. We follow the porter, only just keeping up with him, and see a banner that says, “Welcome Delegates!” The conference is beginning to look serious.

We get into a taxi and the young man says, “Look, just forget about those ... oh, whatever they are ... those dunderheads! I’m worried about you: a good deed won’t go unpunished, you know.”

“But it’s my fault that they’ve had so much trouble. No, trouble’s not the word for it – it’s a calamity!”

“Ah,” he says, waving dismissively, “you’re suffering from the intellectual’s guilt complex. Cops are thrashing traders all over the country these days. You should know better by now – life’s not fair. Give it a rest.”

“No, you airhead,” I think, “I’m not going to give *it* a rest.”

As we’re settling into the hotel, I ask for a telephone directory and begin calling everywhere – to the MVD, the RZhD, the USB – a whole heap of abbreviations. To my surprise, I get straight through. “Come on over. The colonel will see you.” And an hour or so later, I’m already zipping along in a taxi to one of those dark, impersonal buildings, checked bags at my side. The colonel is waiting for me.

Printed in black on gold on the colonel’s door is “Schatz”, and underneath: “Semyon Isaakovich”; and below that, in brackets: “Shlyoma Itskovich”. I’ve never seen it done before. Very bold.

The occupant of the office has only just got up and is still in a somewhat lethargic state. He’s sitting on a bare divan, without pillow or blanket, and dressed in a t-shirt and track pants. One leg Semyon Isaakovich has stuffed into a boot, but not the other. He’s a man of some seventy years, short and completely bald, without moustache or beard, but with hair springing

abundantly from his ears and nose – in fact, from anywhere that hair shouldn't be growing from. His hands, his shoulders, his chest are carpeted with salt-and-pepper wool. I think, "A hairy man – like Esau."

What should I call the colonel? Shlyoma suits him, and I would prefer it, but do you have to be one of his friends to call him that?

"Colonel Schatz," he says, hobbling up to the table, still wearing only one boot.

Understood. Comrade Schatz it is.

His stomach is big and his arms are thick, like a weightlifter's. His broad, fleshy nose is pitted with scars, as is the whole of his cheeks. It's hard for me to describe his eyes: I've scarcely even looked at them. The colonel reaches the table, puts a uniform jacket on top of his t-shirt, and sits down.

I've prepared myself a little: I'm a doctor, a delegate to an international congress.

"A doctor," he says. "A state employee." He is silent. "Sit down."

I sit in a small chair across from him. There's nothing in the room but a large polished table, the divan, several chairs. It must have been redecorated recently.

"You a Yid?"

I nod. It's funny – a state Yid. Like him. Maybe I should get down to business? I tell him what has happened: about our travelling companions the traders: their inhumane, to put it mildly, treatment: the settling of scores at the hands of his colleagues. One would hope for an impartial investigation, for justice. At the very least these things should be returned to their owners.

It's unclear whether the colonel is nodding, or whether his head is faintly trembling.

The phone rings. He picks up the receiver, answers in brief sentences. Mostly foul language. I don't like foul language, or vulgarity in general, but here it seems absolutely natural.

The walls are bare, with no portraits. But on one wall there's a map of the world with little flags sticking out of it. The very scale of the claims ... Although the system by which the flags have been stuck in is incomprehensible.

"Go on and finish up there." He replaces the receiver and turns back to me. "We had a Party organiser, Vassil Dmitrich – a good man. Every morning he'd polish off a bottle of cognac. By 0800 he was already soused."

Why's he going on about this Vassily Dmitrievich? So what?

"He pinched just enough, you see, so that every morning he could have his bottle of cognac. Understand?"

For the moment I'm just listening.

"But here," he nods at the telephone, "the director of a government institution has taken \$13 million – in cash. The employees haven't been paid for half a year. Tell me what that *fathermucker* is doing with \$13 million?"

Nicely said. But what does that have to do with the unlucky traders?

"Traders? You could say that. Read this."

The colonel passes me the same newspaper I'd previously been offered on the train.

"Wanted on suspicion of double murder," I read, "Police are searching for a man from Petrozavodsk." ... And a photograph of Tolya, with a moustache. Here he's laughing, celebrating. The victims were a man and a teenager, his daughter. They had taken Tolya into their home.

It was the same old story – a man living alone with his daughter had sold his apartment in order to move into a smaller one; Tolya had sent for his friend ... Yes, I understand, it was Sery, Sergei.

“No, not Sergei,” says the colonel, “‘Sery’ comes from his last name. Which, in the interests of the investigation, is not being divulged.”

With difficulty I fold the paper and return it to the colonel; my hands are trembling and my voice is trembling too.

“Pardon, Comrade Colonel,” I say, notwithstanding. “But the yellow press, or any press for that matter, isn’t evidence in and of itself. I’m sorry, but it’s just not convincing.”

“Who are you? A jury that needs convincing?”

The way he says it, I understand that what was published in the papers is true.

The colonel takes out several photographs.

“You say you’re a doctor? Look at these.”

We’d studied forensic medicine, but it’s not the same thing. I begin to feel ill and can’t hide it.

“Here,” he pours me some water. “Drink this.”

Precisely how Tolya and Sery murdered them, I’m not going to say. There really are things that no one should know.

I apologise to the colonel – I’ve slept poorly, the cognac without food, and, well, in general

...

“*Farshteyn*,” he says in Yiddish, “I understand.”

“What are the photographs for?”

“To convince their contacts at this end to talk.”

They had identified the murderers on the basis of telephone calls made from the apartment. Automatic telephone exchanges record every number dialled – I didn’t realise that. One or both of them had called Petrozavodsk before the crime and, more importantly, afterward. They had been saving money by not using roaming.

They hadn’t left the apartment immediately. They spent the night there with the bodies. That really got to me. When a patient dies, I want the windows wide open, and the sooner I’m away from the unit, the better. But this pair ... they’d actually spent the night, maybe even two.

“My god,” I start jabbering, incoherent from fright, “I spent the night with murderers! And I slept well! I didn’t sense a thing! My god!”

This makes no particular impression on the colonel.

“Don’t think about them,” he says. “Killers – they’re just your average people.”

Again the telephone; again he listens more than he speaks; again I’m on hold, and for this I’m glad. He puts back the receiver.

“What have you got here? Have you looked?” He’s asking about the bags.

No, it hasn’t even occurred to me to look. He takes the bags and lifts them easily onto the table. He’s very strong.

“Don’t touch anything,” he says. “Otherwise we’ll have to fingerprint you.”

There are electronics. A playstation – for Sery, of course. He opens a small case.

“What’s this?”

“A flute.”

The little girl played the flute? Damn, I’m feeling faint again.

“Maybe, maybe not. These things might have come from different places.”

There are clothes. They weren't even squeamish about taking their clothes! No, the clothing was for covering icons.

"Icons," says the colonel. "Do you believe in God?" Not waiting for my answer, he goes on, "These days everyone believes. We even have hip young Jews who wear crosses."

Instinctively I run my hand across my neck: was the chain visible? I hope the colonel hasn't noticed. Suddenly I don't want to upset him.

Books. No, not books – stamps.

"Do you know anything about stamps?"

No. Why would I? I do know that stamps can be very valuable.

The colonel returns the things to the bags.

"All this costs money," he says.

"And these two, the murderers, I wonder if they wear crosses."

"It doesn't matter. I'm telling you – they're just your average people."

I get up and walk around the room. How can it be, eh? How can I be such a poor judge of people? Why don't I get it? I take another drink of water. Already I'm starting to get used to this place.

The colonel takes the bags away.

"Have a seat. You did everything right. You've helped the investigation. We'd have had to arrest them in the city otherwise."

I can see now that it was just a fortunate coincidence. It seems there was a detective travelling from Moscow on the same train in order to arrest them. I recall the man in the track suit. It was just a fortunate coincidence. They might not have found them at all. The number of cases actually solved is so small it almost doesn't make a difference.

"Doesn't make a difference? Who told you that? What *fathermucker*?"

The colonel grins and affectionately says, "*Shlemazl*."

There's no such word in my vocabulary. What does it mean?

"*Shlemazl*," the colonel explains with pleasure, "means an innocent fool of a suckling pig."

For this I'd come to Petrozavodsk – to be called a baby pig. I feel bitter.

"In America," I say, "somehow they get by without clubbing everyone. There are procedures to be followed. I'm not standing up for murderers and their like, but there are procedures ...."

"In America," responds the colonel. "Let me tell you a story."

And then the colonel told me about his father.

At the beginning of the war, Schatz Senior, a circumcised Jew, was called up to the front, but he never got to fight: by August of '41 the army had been entirely surrounded and had surrendered. Schatz had taken the documents of a dead Ukrainian soldier, so he wasn't shot straight off and found himself not in a concentration camp, but first in one labour camp, then in another. He ended up in a mine in the Ruhr.

"Do you know what *Schatz* means in German?"

Riches, treasure, a lode. The colonel nods. His father spoke a little German – before the war everyone studied German. And so he ended up in the mine with only one wish – to live. Although, as you can imagine, there was no telling how and when the war would end, and he

had no idea what had become of his family. A labour camp is different from a death camp, but among those who spent the entire war there, only one in ten survived.

Fix himself up as an interpreter? No, that was out. First of all, in order to lose himself in the crowd, he had to be like everyone else; and second, the normal people in the camp had a strictly Soviet mentality. Only the scum had any more business with the Germans than was absolutely necessary. Schatz did things differently: he didn't just fulfil the norm, he doubled it. For that they handed out bonuses – bread, tobacco. He quit smoking. His only pleasure, you might say; he quit so that he would have more food and so be able to work, to fulfil the plan. He traded the tobacco with his comrades for food and in this way he always had enough to eat. When he was the first one to come up from the mine, he would steal from the guards – potatoes, eggs, bread. Only food. When they caught him he was beaten, heavily beaten – twenty blows every time. The Germans meant order. The whole of his back was black and blue from the club. They beat him, but they didn't beat him to death.

“So they didn't find out that your father was a Jew?”

As long as they were trying to flush them out, no. In the bath, the other prisoners shielded him – for them he had come up with an excuse.

“Phimosis.”

“Yes, yes, that was it. Then they found out. They found out from our side.”

When it was discovered that Schatz was a Jew, his survival became far more difficult. He was something of a “useful Jew” – the Germans had a word for it. Now he not only had to fulfil the norm, but to triple it. He got it from both sides. But there were only a handful of real sadists in the camp. The guards too were just ordinary people.

“Your average people,” I prompt.

“Yes, average people.” The colonel doesn't notice any irony.

There were only a handful of sadists, no more than now, but one of them was the wife of the camp commandant. A beautiful woman, his father said. She loved to kick them in the groin. She would force them to take off their pants. It amused her, more or less. But she came to grief.

The Americans liberated them. It happened like this: they surrounded the camp and waited for the guards to surrender and get slaughtered by the prisoners. They could wait all day, even two. They kept their distance. It was a typical American practice. The Germans wanted to be taken prisoner, but what did the Americans want with German prisoners?

“What did he do to her?” I ask.

“He had his way with her. Do you understand? He was the first.”

“And then? And then what? Did they kill her?”

“Probably.” He shrugs. “They slaughtered all of the Germans. Hardly anyone survived.”

We sit in silence for a time.

“Tell me, how did your father feel about Germans after that?”

“Nothing in particular. And why ‘did’? My father is alive. He's just angry the Germans don't pay him a pension. He doesn't appear in any of their documents as ‘Schatz’.”

So his father is alive. And what does he do?

“He doesn't do anything. What's there for him to do? He loves going to the market. He remembers that German dame. Before, when my mother was alive, he didn't say a thing, but now he talks about the German more than he talks about his own wife.”

In the office it's almost dark. Suddenly I find myself wanting to show the colonel some kind of support, or at least to look him in the eye, but he's sitting with his back to the window and I can't see his eyes. I try to say something: something about the incontinence of affect,

about geriatric sexuality. As if my membership in the medical profession somehow gives me the right to utter words more or less devoid of meaning.

“Throughout the entire war,” says the colonel, “my father didn’t kill one person. And if the Americans had liberated them the way they should have done – that is humanely – then today he wouldn’t still be thinking about that bit of German skirt.”

The colonel finishes his story and gradually sinks into lethargy. Perhaps it’s time for me to go?

In the end, I ask him, “What do the flags on the map stand for?”

Suddenly he smiles broadly; in the half darkness I can see his teeth:

“They don’t stand for anything. The flags are just flags. That’s all.”

Well, then – should I go?

“And where are you going without a hat?” the colonel asks tenderly. “Have you got a hat?”

“I’ve even got two. A cap and a warm, woolly hat.”

“Put on the woolly one.”

Petrozavodsk. Dark. Cold. Ice. Streets barely lit. You can’t make out a thing.

In the evening at the congress I run into the young man with the handsome voice, the one from the train – he’s sharing his impressions of the city. He says, “It’s got the same kind of shit as the rest of the country”, and expresses a desire to continue our acquaintance in Moscow. Perhaps we could have dinner together? It’s his treat.

Casually he asks: “So how goes it with your two innocents?”

Well put!

“Did you find out anything?”

“No,” I reply. “No.”

Translated by Anne Marie Jackson

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<sup>1</sup> An ironic expression once popular in the Soviet Union. Felix Dzerzhinsky was the first chairman of the Cheka, the first Soviet state security force.