

## **Grigory Pasko**

**(Spent 2 years and 8 months in prison)**

The stolypin

(One day...)

On the tenth of September of 2002, at four in the morning, the duty officer on my floor announced some long-awaited news to me: with things to exit, stage [a standard-vocabulary official order meaning “be prepared to leave immediately with all your belongings for a transfer to another institution”—Trans.].

In staging, the most important thing is not even the stolypin car [a special railcar modified for transporting prisoners, named after a tsarist-era official—Trans.], but knowing to what specific zone they are going to take you. If you know this, there is much else that you can figure out in advance, up to and including the possibility of getting conditional early release on parole. Or on the contrary – the impossibility, if the zone is “red” to the max [Russian prison camps are also called “zones”; the regimen in red zones is much less relaxed than in black zones—Trans.], while the boss-man there – the chief of the camp – is a goner bitch [literally a collaborator who doesn’t have long to live, figuratively “a really nasty person”—Trans.].

I didn’t know until the very last day where they were taking me. By the tenth of September I was pretty sure that it was going to be the 41st zone – the reddest of all the red zones in Primorye. It was located near Ussuriysk, even though the 20th was closer, and by law a convict must be sent to the zone that is closest to his former place of residence. However, that time – as usual, by the way – the rule did not work in relation to me. Something else was “at work”, something one could guess: pressure from the KGB and cowardice from the courts and the system of execution —today’s GULAG.

With two large maidsan- bags (in one – books I had “amassed” in two years in the SIZO) and accompanied by the duty officer, I descended into the holding tank, The duty officer, warrant officer Ivanych, treated me well. It was he who first said that this time the stage was being formed only for the 41st. Well fine, I thought. When it comes right down to it, what difference does it make where you do your time, right? The main thing is how much time you still have left to do.

The shakedown before a stage - this is the mother of all shakedowns. It's not like the one you might have in the SIZO [investigative isolator—Trans.] after court. They inspected every item individually, just about holding every single piece up to the light to look through it. I was also frisked thoroughly, but a special attitude could also be felt. For example, they allowed colored pencils, although according to the instruction you're not supposed to have them.

Then came the walk to the avtozak. On either side – armed security with dogs. The only time I had ever seen such a thing before was in films about fascists. It turns out that nothing has changed since those times. Humanity thinks up wondrous new things – mobile communication, the Internet, all kinds of robots. But when it comes to humiliation and coercion, nobody has thought up anything new.

... The dogs are fierce, and apparently trained to react to prison smells. They were barking loudly and tearing at their leashes. I tossed one bag into the car on the fly and grabbed the other. In the meantime, a hefty german shepherd grabbed me by the leg that was not protected by the bag. It's a good thing that my leg was already in mid-swing. The canine snapped its teeth shut, but just missed getting a solid hold.

Some eight people got stuffed into the avtozak. They were talking about things of little significance: when the train would leave, what track they would take us to, when we would

be in Ussuriysk. One of the zeks [slang for “prisoners”—Trans.], as it turned out, had already done time on that zone. He was brief: the zone was like any other zone, no worse and no better. I recalled the phrase of the inspector of prisons from the novel *The Count of Monte Cristo* by Alexandre Dumas: “When you see one prison, you see them all”. The same could probably be said about camps.

... Standing on a dead-end siding at the Vladivostok railroad station was a special train with special railcars – that same stoly-pin. And again – the guards in two ranks, the barking dogs... We were literally jumping over from the avtozak into the railcar. Moreover, a receiver was standing in the railcar and was pretty much catching us like sacks and then throwing us further on into the depths of the railcar.

The guards – sturdy, solid, silent, cautious. If something didn’t squeeze into their system of perceptions, they would first beat the prisoner, and then adopt a decision as to what to do with him next. Several times I saw how a zek who wasn’t moving quickly enough was encouraged to hurry along a couple of times with a truncheon to his back.

What is a stoly-pin? This is an ordinary railcar, converted into a box for transporting convicts. All encased in metal. All in metal netting. Six wooden shelves are arranged in the place where the compartments are usually found. It is cold. It is dark. It stinks.

The train began to move shortly after five in the morning. I knew that the trip to Ussuriysk was two hours at most. It took us about eight hours. We stood still often and for long periods.

I wanted to drink. But I understood that it was not worth doing this. However, the organism demanded its due. Soon I desperately needed to go do a number one. I told the guard that I wanted to go to the toilet. He didn’t say a word. In the course of an hour he ignored my requests. Then the one in charge came and said that they would take everybody out at a

specific time. The specific time came in another hour. They began taking the people out from the furthest end of the railcar from us. They were taking them out for another hour. By the time they took me out, my desire to relieve myself had gotten blocked up again. I stood over the filthy toilet and couldn't squeeze a single drop out of myself. The door behind me was open, and the convoyer [prisoner transport guard—Trans.] was rushing me along the whole time. I never was able to do anything. Furious at the situation, I returned to “my” cage. I wanted to go to the toilet as before. The desire grew into an obsession. After some time it seemed to me that I wouldn't be able to stand it any longer. I shouted to the convoyer for him to let me out to the toilet. The morose guard came up and said: you've already been taken.

The zeks sitting next to me suggested that I relieve myself into a bottle. But this seemed inconvenient to me, because there were eight of us sitting in the cage.

... In the holding tanks I often sat on stone or metal benches, leaning against icy walls, I was unable to relieve myself for long periods of time in courts, cells, and beakers [one-man isolation compartments in an avtozak—Trans.]. After my first hitch, I was found to have pyelonephritis and cystitis. After the second, a whole bunch of aches and pains previously unknown to me were added to these. This all ended with cancer of the kidney, an extremely complicated operation.... But all that was after release.

...In the stolypin, the zeks told their stories: who had gotten how much and for what. What do you think, they were asking me, where else can we complain? I wanted so much to tell them that the only place left was the sportloto or to the Pope in Rome. But I didn't say this. I felt pity for all of them. I said that they've got to write a super here, a cassie there [supervisory and cassation appeals—Trans.]. But I understood perfectly well that in this country they would never achieve a thing, just as I had been unable to achieve anything.

The train's wheels were rhythmically clacking. I dozed off. And for a moment there, it seemed to me that I was riding in an ordinary, peaceful, civilian, free train, going someplace to the Carpathians or to the souths. Soon I would meet my wife, kin and close ones... I had always loved to travel, including by train. But I never imagined that I would ever have occasion to travel to a strict regime colony in an arrestees' railcar – a stolylin.

... It was light outside the barred little window. This means that day had come. The watch on my wrist said it was about one in the afternoon. They hadn't shaken down my watch from me because convicts are allowed them. But they are prohibited to persons under investigation. Idiocy? Unconditionally. But I have had many an occasion to be convinced that Russia's entire penal system is literally woven out of pieces of idiocy. Moreover, at the core of every such piece lies debasement of human dignity. The state uses every ounce of its energy to let a person know that he is nothing but an animal and that his life isn't worth a dime.

The years go by, the centuries pass, but not one damn thing changes in this country. The surnames of the tsars change. The current one is worse than some of his predecessors. And things haven't gotten better under him, nor will they. That's what I think, and I've got reason to think this.

...In Ussuriysk they reloaded us into autozaks once again. Faster. Faster!- the convoyers hurried us along. In his rush, one of the zeks had forgotten a bottle of water in the railcar. He tried to turn and make a dash to go back for it but got such a powerful blow with a truncheon to his back that he instantly turned right back around.

I noticed a peculiarity: nobody spoke with the convoyers. With the jailers, yes, but not with these morose young human robots with their big fat faces. Such a detail stuck in the memory. When they were stuffing us into the stolylin in Vladivostok, I passed through the railcar

nearly all the way to the end. There, by the passageway to the next car, on a little table in the convoyers' quarters, lay a newspaper with a scanword. For those who don't know what this is, it's a kind of crossword for dimwits. Anyway, when I once again passed by these quarters, in Ussuriysk already, I saw that same newspaper with that same scanword. It was half solved. For comparison: even a zek with a minimal education would need an hour and a half to solve a scanword in a paper like that. A herd of convoyers had proven incapable of doing it in eight hours.

... The cars stopped beside the camp gates. A double line of security, dogs, and... a bunch of curious folk from the colony's administration and convicts-shnyrs [usually, a prisoner who does cleaning or works as an orderly; here, it is meant merely as a general insult, implying that these particular prisoners are low-lives.—Trans.].

We were taken into the bath house dressing room and told that before quarantine everybody would be entered in a special journal, change into prison fatigues, and get their hair shaved bald. All this took about two hours. In this time, all kinds of convicts from the ones in the camp would come up and take an interest: who, where from, for how long, might so-and-so be among us...

Later I grasped that all these guys just hanging around like that were "reds", "strung" - that is, persons from among those serving punishment who had written a declaration about voluntary cooperation with the colony administration and had donned the red armband of an activist on their sleeve. From are also called "bitchified", "goats"...

There were hundreds like that in the red zone. More than half of the 1300 convicts, I think.

(After only a couple of days, the chief of the colony offered me the position of librarian. I refused. I did not put on a red armband. In the character reference before conditional early release on parole, they wrote such things about me that I ought to have been given a second

term. They made my blood curdle so much that not even every old-timer zek has had to go through something like this. But I did not put on a red armband).

...It was already towards evening in the bath house dressing room that I had my head shaved bald for the first time in many years, perhaps not since childhood. My whole face was immediately transformed. It was now difficult to recognize the journalist in me: every inch a zek. I think that such reducing of a person to nothing is not by chance. It is as if though you're letting a person understand that from now on he belongs to the state, to the UIN [Administration for the Execution of Punishments, the direct successor to GULAG—Trans.] system, that he is more like an animal than like a human being.

...When it had finally gotten completely dark beyond the windows, a noise was heard: this was a new batch of zeks replenishing the quarantine barrack of the red zone.