Russia's Penal Colony in the Far East

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A Translation of Vlas Doroshevich's "Sakhalin"

Translated and annotated by
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Dedicated to my former students at
Norco State Prison, California,
and to E.M.D.,
my teacher of hard knocks

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AAG
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Fig. 1: V. M. Doroshevich

INTRODUCTION

On First Impressions and Lasting Choices

"The first impression is always the strongest," writes Doroshevich of his initial view of Sakhalin island, and this well-worn adage is also appropriate here, for this translation introduces Doroshevich to English-language readers.[1] Despite having been imperial Russia's most famous and successful journalist; having changed Russian journalism with his feuilleton-style; having been read by every segment of society and lauded by such literati as L. N. Tolstoi, A. P. Chekhov, V. G. Korolenko, A. M. Gor´kii and V. V. Stasov; and despite his Sakhalin feuilletons' renewed popularity in post-Communist Russia, Doroshevich remains largely unknown to non-Russian readers. A pity, for he deserves wider recognition.

Vlas Mikhailovich Doroshevich was born 5 January 1865 (old style) to Aleksandra Ivanovna Sokolova (1836–1914), of the wealthy and titled Denis´ev

clan of Riazan´ Province. Details concerning Vlas's father are vague, but he appears to have been an unsuccessful writer who died shortly before his son's birth. Aleksandra was educated at the prestigious Smol´nyi Institute, but was disinherited by her parents for having married beneath her social status. Struggling, and with two other children, Aleksandra took her son when he was six months old to Moscow and gave him to a childless woman and her husband, one Mikhail Doroshevich, with a note pinned to the infant's blouse requesting he be called Blez (Blaise) in honor of the French philosopher Blaise Pascal. The couple took the boy in but Russianized his name as Vlasii, or Vlas, for short. Ten years later, Aleksandra reclaimed her son through a legal procedure that Doroshevich later characterized as depriving him of his personal rights.

Vlas's mother endowed him with what one contemporary observed was her "murderous sarcasm" and—most importantly—an interest in journalism. Aleksandra had begun writing for the *Moscow Times* (*Moskovskie vedomosti*) and other newspapers in 1868, and eventually earned a modest reputation such that her memoirs were serialized in the *Historical News* (*Istoricheskii vestnik*) shortly before her death. Remarkable for being a woman in a business dominated to this day by men, she invested Vlas with a similar sense of ambition; and despite considerable tension between the two, his success as a journalist, fiction-writer and essayist must have exceeded her expectations. Yet it was Vlas's rebelliousness that was sooner evident. When he was sixteen years old he withdrew from *gimnaziia*[2]—where he had stayed long enough to become familiar with Russia's literary canon and conversant in French and English—because, as he later said, he could not stomach the "Pharisees" who ran the place. He soon left home as well. To speak anachronistically, Doroshevich tuned in and dropped out so as "to go to the people"—a notion then still popular among young Russians and one that recalled the "Going to the People" movement of 1874, when thousands of students poured into the countryside in a fit of romantic solidarity with the peasantry, or *narod*, who they imagined embodied Russia's heart and soul. But peasants proved suspicious of these students' well-intentioned efforts to bring them modern education and medicine, and ended up turning many in to the police. In contrast to these utopian proselytizers, young Vlas became a common laborer as well as a dockyard worker. The repeated invocation in his feuilletons of the phrase "to the people" thus serves as a double-edged commentary on both his youthful experiences and the sanctimoniousness of many a social worker. All the same, it is to his credit that his stint as a manual laborer was brief, for he soon found work as a proof-reader and actor. The latter job helps explain his writer's interest in theater and theater criticism,[3] an interest captured in this book in his wonderful description of the Easter spectacular staged by Sakhalin's convicts.

Doroshevich's big break came at the age of seventeen, when his writing attracted the attention of N. I. Pastukhov, publisher and editor of the *Moscow Flyer* (*Moskovskii listok*). From this point on he earned his living as a writer. During the 1880s, as the newspaper business took off thanks to growing literacy and a rapidly expanding urban population, Doroshevich honed his style, creating "a new language"[4] that "changed news coverage in Russia during the two decades before the 1917 revolution."[5] By turns satirical and serious, he was similar to the muck-raking journalists then becoming popular in the United States and who exposed the venality, corruption and absurdities of everyday life. He wrote for other serials, including *Entertainment* (*Razvlechenie*), *Alarm Clock* (*Budil´nik*) and the *Petersburg Gazette* (*Peterburgskaia gazeta*). In autumn 1893, Doroshevich moved to Odessa to become a reporter for the *Odessa Flyer* (*Odesskii listok*), which had been founded in 1880 and enjoyed a circulation of some 10 000 thanks to its coverage of local and national affairs, critical reviews and articles on economics and politics. Multi-ethnic Odessa (as of 1892 one of the empire's largest cities, with a population of 340 000[6]), nestled along the Black Sea and renowned for its criminality, corruption and public scandals, offered considerable material for a writer like Doroshevich. It also boasted a vibrant artistic culture, and so in between his wry accounts of human folly he managed to celebrate its theater and other gems.

In 1897, Doroshevich visited Sakhalin as part of a larger overseas assignment that included the United States (about which he wrote several articles). He had already gained foreign experience thanks to an earlier assignment to Western Europe, and it was there, in France, that Doroshevich had been impressed by the Parisian "feuilletons—brief essays, familiar in tone and catholic in subject."[7] He began imitating this style—a style, it must be said, that was not to every reader's liking. Poet and literary critic Zinaida Hippius sniffed that his appeal to "the unsophisticated provincial" was no substitute for literary talent. Doroshevich's very popularity therefore cast doubt on him. A rival editor called him "the basest of men," and poet Aleksandr Blok labeled him an "untalented scoundrel."[8]

In 1899, he became principal correspondent for *Russia* (*Rossiia*), a short-lived affair that led, in 1902, to *The Russian Word* (*Russkoe slovo*), for which he served as editor until 1918. As Doroshevich's fame grew along with his Sakhalin feuilletons' serialization in *Russian Wealth* (*Russkoe bogatstvo*), *God's World* (*Mir bozhii*) and other journals, and after their publication in book-form, he set about recounting his world travels and, in 1905, began publishing a multi-volume collection of all his feuilletons that was, however, not a commercial success. Doroshevich also made a name for himself as a short-story writer, novelist and commentator on religious topics, penning such titles as *In the Promised Land (Palestine)* (*V zemle obetovanoi [Palestina]*) (1900), *Mu-shan: A Chinese*

Novel (*Mu-sian: Kitaiskii roman*) (1901) and *Legends and Stories of the East* (*Legendy i skazki Vostoka*) (1902). However, his collected Sakhalin feuilletons remained his most popular book.[9] Doroshevich—perhaps in part because of his outcast status among intellectuals, though despite a love of the high life that included a motorcar, trips to Monte Carlo and failed marriages to two actresses—welcomed both the Romanovs' demise and the Bolsheviks' rise. His last published feuilleton was directed against the royals; and after his death in Petrograd (soon to be renamed Leningrad) on 22 February 1922, he was buried next to the grave of Vera Zasulich, a terrorist and failed assassin of a tsarist official.

Before turning to the feuilletons that make up this book, a few words first need to be said about Sakhalin and the Siberian exile system. The Russian autocracy began forcibly transferring subjects across the Urals in 1590, with 1593 marking Siberian exile's first use as a punitive punishment. From the outset, however, exile's utilitarian function greatly outweighed its penal role, and the small numbers exiled prior to 1649 comprised mostly Polish and Latvian war prisoners assigned to military service. Exiles' numbers greatly increased following the 1649 Law Code (*Ulozhenie*), which largely replaced capital punishment with flogging or mutilation and banishment to Siberia. Those who survived the one-to-two-year march in chains to Eniseisk, Krasnoiarsk, Ilimsk or Okhotsk—with nostrils ripped out, noses, ears or hands cut off, backs shredded by the knout, or faces and bodies branded by an equivalent of the mark of Cain—were generally tasked with becoming state peasants whose job it was to supply both the Cossacks engaged in stringing up, burning, raping or otherwise coercing natives into handing over their fur caches, and the state servitors who processed and delivered these sable, fox and mink furs to the Kremlin. But for all the state's many efforts to transform criminals and other societal deviants into productive peasants, this was largely an exercise in futility. That Russia's leaders never abandoned this effort says much about a political system which, by definition, preyed upon and condemned to premature death a sizeable proportion of subjects. Between 1807 and 1917 over 1 000 000 people were forcibly removed to Siberia, including a quarter-million children. Not all died prematurely or even necessarily suffered worse than if they had never been exiled; and it is important to add that over half were exiled by their own village communes through administrative procedures bypassing the judiciary. Nonetheless, as of the fin-de-siècle, the 300-year-old festering sore of Siberian exile was giving tsarism an anachronistic stench that Doroshevich and others found intolerable.

Apposite the exile system was Russia's penal labor regime known as *katorga*, created in 1696 by Peter the Great for the purpose of building his Black Sea fleet. *Katorga* sites throughout the empire became destinations for thousands of men and women, often sentenced for the most minor infractions. Penal laborers (*katorzhane*)

built navy yards along the Baltic Sea, allowed the emperor to realize his so called "window on the West," and constructed fortifications against the Swedes in the north and the Kazakhs in the south. Beginning in 1767, Catherine the Great assigned most penal laborers to the Nerchinsk Mining Command, whose mines and smelteries spider-webbed throughout Transbaikalia and served as *katorga*'s epicenter until the 1880s. Conditions were such that "Nerchinsk *katorga*" became a metonym in contemporary folk songs for torture and suffering.[10]

For several reasons, not least the exhaustion of Transbaikalia's silver and lead deposits, *katorga* became during the 1860s more a boondoggle than a boon for the autocracy, its prisons dilapidated and understaffed and its prisoners escaping in droves to join Siberia's enormous and often violent vagabond (*brodiaga*) population. Similar to the homeless in England and the United States at that time, Siberian *brodiagi* drew the attention of both authorities and social commentators such as S. V. Maksimov and N. M. Iadrintsev, who alternately heroized and denigrated them. Whether discussing those "on the run" (*v begakh*) or already incarcerated, Doroshevich in his Sakhalin feuilletons built upon this *brodiaga*-literature and, as such, contributed to the construction of an "other" against which his readers could favorably compare themselves.

Nerchinsk *katorga*'s decline compelled the government to search for an alternate location for its 14 000 penal laborers, and in 1868, the Imperial Cabinet, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Main Administration of Eastern Siberia initiated plans to transform Sakhalin into a penal colony. Eastern Siberia's willful governor-general N. N. Murav´ev had first asserted Russian sovereignty over the island a decade earlier; but official annexation came only when contesting power Japan agreed to the 1875 St Petersburg Treaty, which opened the way for what some envisaged would be a Russian version of Australia. Plans were launched to assign penal laborers to the navy's mines at Dué Post (Duiskii post) and, once their labor sentences ended, to use them as exile-settlers (*ssyl´no-poselentsy*) to build and populate settlements that would "russify" and secure the island against foreign powers. Petersburg had by 1875 already shipped several hundred male and female convicts to Sakhalin, though because coal deposits were failing to meet expectations only about half were laboring in Dué while the rest were assigned nearby to a so-called "model farm." Convicts and guards alike lived in dreadful conditions, occupying hastily-constructed barracks and subsisting on cabbage and salt pork. The colony stagnated for several years due to administrative problems stemming from the 1881 assassination of Alexander II and frequent leadership changes at the interior ministry. Nonetheless, during the period 1879–83 500 prisoners a year were deported to Sakhalin, and twice this number during 1884–85. As of 1884, when a *katorga* administration was at last officially established on Sakhalin, 4 000 exiles were there; and by 1897, the

year Doroshevich visited, some 22 000 were there. On the eve of the 1905 Japanese invasion that put an end to the colony, Sakhalin's non-indigenous population totaled 35 000, the vast majority of which consisted of exiles and their families.[11] Sakhalin was one of the largest penal colonies ever established, and bears similarities to those established in New South Wales, French Guiana, New Caledonia, Bermuda, Malacca, and Mauritius.

Despite Petersburg's dream of reinvigorating *katorga*, Sakhalin replicated the problems at Nerchinsk and other sites to become an even greater burden on the treasury. Island administrators routinely violated convicts' already meager legal protections, constantly flogged them using either the birch rod or *plet´* (similar to the cat-o'-nine-tails), and hanged a number of men. Hangings had subsided by 1897, though Doroshevich did witness several floggings. But it was the entire *mise en scène*, he writes, and "the sight of doleful, forced laborers [which] showed that I had traveled back fifty years, that what surrounded me was nothing less than serfdom." This impression strengthened over time:

> The same forced labor, the same people with no rights whatsoever, the degrading punishments, the same pre-Reform regime,[12] the endless bureaucratic red tape, the same appraisal of a person as "living inventory," the same ordering around of a person "per discretion," the same cohabitating through contract marriages as under peasant law (based not on desire or attraction but according to directive, such is the convict so viewed like a peasant)—all of serfdom's old "accouterments," the compulsory "mincing and shuffling"—it all created an utter illusion of that "bygone era."

As this passage suggests, Sakhalin's military administration and distance from the capital allowed the colony to exist in a time-warp, where terror propped up a system that reduced prisoners to sub-humans.

So why did Doroshevich want to visit this degrading hell-hole? First, his youthful rebelliousness and penchant for rooting out corruption and hypocrisy must be considered as factors. Nearly all prisoners sentenced to Sakhalin were pooled together from throughout the empire and quarantined in Odessa before departing aboard Volunteer Fleet steamers, and so Odessa always had a number of convicts who could be seen marching through the streets in chains. Yet local newspapers ignored them and their fate, probably for fear of invoking government wrath. That is, until the *Odessa Flyer*'s star reporter boarded the prison steamer *Iaroslavl´* so as to report back from the mysterious "dead island" (*mertvyi ostrov*).

"Dead island," evoking as it does Fedor Dostoevskii's *Notes from a Dead House*,[13] points to another reason for Doroshevich's interest in Sakhalin.

Fragments of Dostoevskii's pivotal work had first appeared in the journal *Russian World* (*Russkii mir*) in 1860–61, with the full text serialized by *Time* (*Vremia*) in 1861–62 and a separate volume appearing in 1862. The first major work to even acknowledge Siberian exiles' existence, *Dead House* inaugurated the literary canon on Siberian exile and, as such, is lauded several times by Doroshevich. Its influence is particularly evident in his feuilleton "*Katorga* Theater," an homage to Dostoevskii's marvelous description of the Christmas spectacular his fellow prisoners performed in the Omsk fortress. Doroshevich may also have been influenced by another semi-autobiographical prison memoir, *In the World of the Outcasts: Notes of a Former Penal Laborer*, written by the political exile P. F. Iakubovich using the pseudonym "L. Mel´shin" and first serialized by *Russian Wealth* in 1895–98. Doroshevich was possibly familiar as well with several important studies of Siberian exile published before his journey, and with American explorer George Kennan's articles and two-volume *Siberia and the Exile System*.[14]

But more than any other work, Anton Chekhov's *Sakhalin Island* (*Ostrov Sakhalin*) influenced Doroshevich's decision to visit the island. Chekhov's own visit of 1890 is much more famous, principally because of his greater literary renown, though *Sakhalin Island* (first serialized by *Russian Thought* [*Russkaia mysl´*] in 1893–94) is perhaps his least-known work. Scholars debate the reasons for his journey (which unlike Doroshevich he made overland) largely because Chekhov himself seems not to have been entirely sure why he wanted to go. Letters only reveal that he was dissatisfied with his work to that point and felt a need to contribute something "useful" to society. To make his account more veracious, Chekhov eliminated almost all qualitative language and, through a compensatory and considerable amount of quantifiable data, ended up producing a quirky sociological analysis of the penal colony. He even compiled a census that accounted for nearly every exile and consists of some 10 000 standardized questionnaires now archived in Moscow's Russian State Library.[15] His monograph (which he incidentally unsuccessfully defended as his doctoral dissertation) is by turns informative, interesting and, unfortunately, rather dry. It does contain instances of classic Chekhovian understatement and wit, but only the chapter "Egor's Story" matches his best writing.

Doroshevich admired Chekhov but thought he could write a better book. In a eulogy penned shortly after the writer's death he delivered his opinion of *Sakhalin Island*:

> The abundance of statistical figures, actually hindering the artistry of the Chekhovian *Sakhalin*, resulted, in all probability, from Chekhov's desire to show that he was *serious, serious, serious.* …

> Such a writer as Tolstoi says of the Chekhovian *Sakhalin*:
> "*Sakhalin* was poorly written!"
> We are obliged to agree with this critique.[16]

This along with other factors pushed him to make his own visit to what had by then become—thanks in no small part to Chekhov—the most diabolical place in the empire. "Sakhalin was an important boundary-line for Doroshevich," writes S. V. Bukchin,[17] for despite having enjoyed considerable success as a journalist, he felt like Chekhov that he was selling his talents too cheaply and wanted to contribute a work of social import. By following Chekhov's lead, Doroshevich was trying to ascend to a higher literary stratum.

A final reason for Doroshevich's decision to visit Sakhalin is indicated by a book he published two years after his Sakhalin feuilletons first appeared in book-form. *How I Got to Sakhalin* is a sardonic account of how, thanks to the embarrassment Chekhov had already caused the government, Doroshevich had to negotiate a series of bureaucratic hurdles to reach his goal. As it was, the Main Prison Administration allowed him to depart aboard the *Iaroslavl´* on 20 February 1897 without formally granting him permission to actually debark on Sakhalin. It also ordered him not to speak to any of the several hundred prisoners aboard the steamer. Captain and crew begrudgingly tolerated their unwanted passenger: "Two powers struggled with each other. On one side there was order and discipline. On the other there was the correspondent, everywhere, like a nasty smell, a bacillus, a scoundrel, a microbe, the penetrating correspondent."[18] Fortunately, during the journey the crew relaxed to the extent that Doroshevich was allowed to read letters the prisoners were sending home from the port of Aden. In his feuilleton "Voluntary Followers" he quotes liberally from these letters, providing a fascinating glimpse into underclass spousal relations at that time. But the ever intrepid reporter was not content with this. Ignoring orders, he snuck around after dark to eavesdrop on and eventually speak with convicts. "The topics for discussion were most various," he writes. "Everything was touched on, as should be when you want to know a person. We talked about prison arrangements, prison news, their former lives, about crimes, God, justice, punishment." His account of these first conversations reveals a paternal compassion not dissimilar from that expressed by Dostoevskii in both *Dead House*'s conclusion and letters he wrote soon after leaving prison.[19] "I often encountered such original, powerful, audacious worldviews," writes Doroshevich, "views such as would not seem could enter a simple person's head especially. You happened to learn about such sufferings, about such misfortunes, as would never present themselves to you."[20]

On 5 April, after a journey that included the Suez Canal, Horn of Africa and brief stops in Ceylon and Japan, the *Iaroslavl´* arrived at Vladivostok. Doroshevich's comment that this was the Orthodox calendar's Palm Saturday

suggests the importance he attributed to his mission. Despite the daily *Vladivostok* announcing the arrival of an "outstanding, professional and well-traveled journalist" and kindly adding, "We wish Vlas Doroshevich complete success in his undertaking to study the dead island,"[21] the reporter had little more than faith to get him the rest of the way to Sakhalin. Local officials told him that only the Priamur Territory's governor-general, Sergei Mikhailovich Dukhovskoi,[22] could grant permission to visit the island, and so at first Doroshevich planned to take the train to his headquarters in Khabarovsk, several hundred miles north along the Amur River, to lodge a personal appeal. But one of the river's tributaries flooded and washed out both tracks and telegraph line; and then Doroshevich learned that even if he could reach Khabarovsk, this would not matter, because Dukhovskoi was leaving on a tour of Kamchatka. With Vladivostok's regional governor in Japan for a medical procedure, a now desperate Doroshevich approached the vice-governor, who did little more than grumble and roll a cigarette during the entire interview. Like some *Catch-22* character, Doroshevich found himself reeling at the bureaucratic *formal'nost'* he was encountering: "[T]here opened up a corner of such a bestial, monstrous and improbable 'world of miracles' as should have been impossible for me to fall into. Sakhalin now became not a mania—it became my illness."[23] Indeed, this "illness" led him to concoct the following plan:

> If everything fell through, I would leave my belongings with passport and money at the Volunteer Fleet agency for later pickup. I would then go to the first city I found in Ussuri Territory and, having dressed shabbily, present myself to the police.
>
> "I'm a *brodiaga*, origins forgotten."
>
> I'd be arrested, tried and, as was normal, sentenced to a year-and-a-half of *katorga* labor on Sakhalin.[24]

Doroshevich guessed that no more than eight months would pass before officials learned his identity as a *brodiaga-nepomniashchii* (a vagabond who refused to identify himself) was false, by which time he would have gathered all the information he needed to write about Sakhalin *katorga*. Apocryphal or not, this story suggests the lengths he was willing to go to reach what increasingly seemed a forbidden island defended by all the subterfuge bureaucrats could manage, yet made all the more intriguing because of this:

> I repeat: all life, all interests for me merged into one. Sakhalin! Sakhalin hid all of life from me. For me, nothing existed outside of Sakhalin. I'd lie down, get up, talk, eat thinking of only one thing—Sakhalin.[25]

The obsessive or mad can be strangely convincing, and so perhaps this explains how Doroshevich managed to be aboard the *Iaroslavl´* when it left Vladivostok for Korsakovsk Post, the first of two stops on Sakhalin. He had not yet received permission from Dukhovskoi; but with the governor-general incommunicado somewhere in Kamchatka, neither had Doroshevich been explicitly denied permission to travel. No subordinate was willing to risk a decision the governor-general might later reverse, and so Doroshevich, by now incapable of imagining any destination other than Sakhalin, simply wormed his way through the chinks in the armor. He also seems to have found sympathy among officials who believed he would publicize their plights, too. During the brief trip across the Tatar Straits Doroshevich met several officials returning from furlough; none was happy to be returning to Sakhalin, and one told him, "It's an accursed life. Understand that I had a kind of derangement of the mind. Yes! A proper derangement. I'm telling you, I fancied myself a horse. I'd stamp my feet and demand hay."[26]

On 16 April, the *Iaroslavl´* dropped anchor within sight of Korsakovsk's lighthouse, which also happened to be the site of the prison graveyard. The contrast between light and dark figures prominently in Doroshevich's book, and when applying this dichotomy to people he often finds light among the exiles but dark among the officials. At anchor, the steamer was visited by a group of Korsakovsk officials. "It was they who held my 'fate' in their hands," recalls Doroshevich.

> After ten minutes I entered the wardroom. It could have been imagined I'd landed in the wings during a production of *The Inspector*. The actors, seeming to be Gogolesque personages, were drinking vodka, eating appetizers and smacking their lips. There was noisy uproar and laughter.
>
> …To a man, they were coarse. Marvellously coarse. Coarse not in the raw and exposed sense. But a terrible spiritual coarseness showed through these individuals' features.[27]

However, these Gogolesque personages did not prevent Doroshevich going ashore and visiting Korsakovsk. Indeed, the local warden allowed him to visit the prison whenever he wanted.

Doroshevich's account does not make clear how long he spent in Korskovsk, but his stay was sufficient for him to be feted by local officials and to learn much. While there, he met two of his most valuable informants. One was a young *brodiaga*, identified only as Sokol´skii, who proved a useful source on prison life and who figures in several feuilletons. Doroshevich does not say why Sokol´skii became a *brodiaga-nepomniashchii*, but notes that he had been a Moscow university student in his former life, all of which suggests Sokol´skii was a radical

who disguised his identity to avoid harsher punishment. Far less winsome is the administrator Vladimir Nikolaevich Bestuzhev, who filled Doroshevich in on the exile settlements' corrupt management—ironically, mostly at his own hands. "But I didn't trust a single word of Bestuzhev or Sokol´skii without verification," adds Doroshevich, who also accepted unctuous petty officials' dinner invitations to learn more of Korsakovsk's secrets.[28]

It was nevertheless general knowledge that "real *katorga*" was not to be found in Korsakovsk, but rather to the north in Aleksandrovsk Post, headquarters of Vladimir Dmitrievich Merkazin, Sakhalin's military governor. With the *Iaroslavl´* scheduled to depart soon for Aleksandrovsk, Doroshevich managed to send a telegram to Merkazin asking permission for a visit he had already commenced. Like his counterparts on the mainland, Merkazin replied that only Dukhovskoi could grant such permission, but added that Dukhovskoi would be stopping in Korsakovsk during his return from Kamchatka, albeit not until after the *Iaroslavl´* was scheduled to leave. Doroshevich planned to wait for Dukhovskoi, but writes that his presence sent Korsakovsk's commander into a panic for fear that he would be punished for having allowed Doroshevich to land in the first place. And then there was Bestuzhev—"a Hercules, his hauberked chest covered with orders and medals"—who paid Doroshevich a visit the night before the *Iaroslavl´* was to leave and warned him against publishing what he had told him. "The finale of *The Inspector* was warming up," quips Doroshevich, and so, like a holy fool pilgriming to the Promised Land, he boarded the *Iaroslavl´* for Aleksandrovsk.

Upon arriving, he was at first allowed ashore only to tour the dockyards. But it was here, in the rancid eating-houses (*kharchevni*) lining the wharf, that he met seventy-year-old prostitutes, one of the several floggers he describes in "The Executioners," and the feral and punch-drunk Sashka-the-Bear; though at this point the officials there avoided him like the plague. Doroshevich eventually made the acquaintance of Nikolai Stepanovich Lobas, a medical doctor much loved by his convict-patients and who turned out to be, like him, one of the few "humanitarians" on Sakhalin. It was apparently thanks to this doctor's intercession that, when Dukhovskoi finally responded to the attempts to contact him, he granted Doroshevich unfettered access to every individual and institution there. Doroshevich enjoyed a level of access surpassing even that given Chekhov. Even taking into account Lobas's influence, Dukhovskoi's leniency is nevertheless rather difficult to explain. Dukhovskoi's sympathy for the plight of Siberia's exiles is on record, and so perhaps he thought Doroshevich could communicate the truth of the matter to Petersburg in a way that he, in his official capacity, could not. Alternatively, Dukhovskoi may have been trying to use the reporter for his own ends in the back-stabbing world of tsarist politics. Finally, he may not have cared one way

or the other, but simply found it easier to let Doroshevich stay where he had already dared go.

Whatever the case, *How I Got to Sakhalin* (which Doroshevich called a "preface" to his Sakhalin feuilletons) not only explains his efforts to get there, but further suggests his motivations for going in the first place. In a somewhat rhapsodic conclusion, he writes:

> I've considered this necessary to write so as to tell the public what for our brother journalist, deprived of all rights, happens to constitute the truth. I dedicate this preface to my brothers, the journalists, not of course as a boast:
>
> "Look, I've done well! I was opposed, but I succeeded!"
>
> I've written this simply because the story of a journalist's mishaps is more familiar and understandable to them than other things. I've written this in order to tell them:
>
> "Friends! Don't complain about opposition! Be grateful for it! Often, when we are opposed, we become only stronger because of this. This opposition is often only a token of our independence."
>
> In concluding this preface, I consider it necessary to express a deep recognition for all who "opposed" my going to Sakhalin. Thanks only to this did I avoid a great misfortune—seeing through someone else's eyes.
>
> I was not shown—I saw.
>
> I was not shown what was convenient. But I saw what needed to be seen. And thanks only to this was I able to write a book in which there were a thousand defects but all told a singular virtue: The truth.
>
> This I can surely say.[29]

Sakhalin's officials unswervingly followed Dukhovskoi's order, striving to outdo each other by hosting the (now even more) "obviously important journalist." Doroshevich learned so much from these contacts that his reportage on former prison warden A. S. Fel´dman earned him a lawsuit for slander, though Fel´dman's charges were eventually dismissed. In addition to officials, the murderers Poluliakhov and Pazul´skii, like Sokol´skii earlier, proved to be valuable contacts and informants, introducing Doroshevich to numerous prisoners and guaranteeing his protection. Pazul´skii even wrote a letter of recommendation so that he could safely visit prisons in the settlements of Rykovsk and Onor. Doroshevich confesses that he gave away a lot of money in return for information, but avoided "tossing it around… so as not to lose *katorga*'s respect."[30] Journalistic ethics were certainly not what they are supposed to be today, but like any good reporter Doroshevich tried to corroborate what he was told.

Within weeks after arriving on the island Doroshevich began telegraphing his feuilletons to the *Odessa Flyer*, which ran them on a weekly basis between August 1897 and March 1898, after which they appeared less frequently. Doroshevich later signed a contract with publisher A. V. Amfiteatrov to publish his Sakhalin feuilletons in *Russia* beginning 6 July 1899. When *Russia* folded after three years, *The Russian Word* acquired publishing rights. Aside from serialization, the collected feuilletons first appeared in a two-volume Polish translation published in Warsaw in 1901. The first Russian edition came out in 1903 under two imprints: I. D. Shchukin and I. D. Sytin. By 1907 a fourth edition had come out. For obvious reasons the book was not published in the Soviet Union, though an émigré publication was produced in Paris in 1935. The several editions published since the Soviet Union's collapse attest to Doroshevich's enduring readability, though it should be noted that Zakharov's 2001 edition is bowdlerized. The translation here is from I. D. Sytin's 1903 edition. Doroshevich continued to write about Sakhalin and penal labor. For example, he contributed the introduction to a Russian-language study of French penal labor, and wrote a series on Sakhalin's small number of political exiles that appeared in *The Russian Word* in 1906.

Russian-language scholars have naturally drawn comparisons between Doroshevich's and Chekhov's accounts, though in the end the choice as to which is superior comes down to personal taste. However, it must be said that Chekhov translator Brian Reeve's comment that Doroshevich's book lacks substance and consists mostly of "pages… devoted to sensational interviews, conducted in racy slang, with the most infamous and colourful of the Sakhalin prisoners"[31] is both prudish and misleading. Whereas the feuilletons do contain many interviews and considerable slang, both reflect Doroshevich's effort to let Sakhalin's outcasts tell their stories in their own words. By comparison, Chekhov, through his reliance on statistics, does what so many social scientists are prone to do: reduce human beings to numbers. Perhaps just such a concern led Doroshevich to give flesh and blood to those who were at best abstractions for many readers. Though sensationalized by the genre of bandit stories, vagabonds and criminals were disdained as untouchables by a readership that hoped itself immune to their depredations. Doroshevich's lengthy verbatim renderings of exiles' personal stories therefore represent a Dostoevskian effort to humanize the stigmatized and to suggest that crime has social origins. Despite his frequent religious invocations, Doroshevich was aware that Sakhalin's exiles were not reducible to being simply evil men and women, but were men and women, pure and simple, who in many cases and for various reasons had committed extraordinarily evil crimes. He uses their personal histories and origins to query the sources of these crimes and arrives at both biological and cultural explanations—in other words, explanations not dissimilar from those of today's criminologists.

Doroshevich borrowed many of his analytical categories from his contemporary, Cesare Lombroso, the Italian criminologist who believed that physiognomy indicated criminal proclivity and that such proclivity was genetically transmitted. Lombroso's *Criminal Man* (*L'uomo delinquente*) was internationally popular and profoundly influential, going through five heavily revised editions between 1876 and 1897. Like Lombroso, Doroshevich discusses "criminals and religion," "tattoos," "jargon," "suicide among criminals," and so on. The inclusion in his book of head shots of so-called "prisoner types" (*arestantskie tipy*), some of which are reproduced here, replicated those used by Lombroso to typify putative criminal physiognomies. Despite such mimicry, Doroshevich abjured the statistical methodology Lombroso and other criminologists used.

Doroshevich's Sakhalin feuilletons do not constitute a chronological or even consistent narrative whole; rather, his book is like a shoebox containing a random number of hand-painted postcards. Five recurrent themes nevertheless give the collection structural integrity; but before turning to these it is essential to understand how Doroshevich uses the word *katorga*. As noted above, *katorga* was the penal labor regime established by Peter the Great. Apropos this penologico-administrative apparatus, Doroshevich is therefore able to speak of "Nerchinsk *katorga*," "Sakhalin *katorga*" and other adjectivized forms of penal labor. *Katorga* also means "penal labor" in the abstract, that is, non-institutional, sense of the word, and so Doroshevich may use "*katorga* labor" so as to make a distinction with "free labor." Finally, Doroshevich frequently uses *katorga* as a collective noun signifying prison society: "*katorga* believes this," "*katorga* does that." He sometimes rarefies it, so as to distinguish the caste of hardened professional criminals from the mass of "first-timers" and "short-termers" disdained as "the herd" (*shpanka*).

Katorga—its composition, history, stratification, mores, traditions, behavior, etc.—is therefore the first of the book's five themes. Doroshevich's description of *katorga*, from its foundation myths to its song cycles and modes of dress, reflects Russian ethnographers' efforts to understand that great "other," the *narod*, through taxonomy. Historian Cathy Frierson has shown how writers alternately romanticized peasants as noble savages and demonized them as feral beasts.[32] Doroshevich tends to assign similar roles to criminals and *brodiagi*, though he plays with these and other tropes, often ironically. For example, he describes the *brodiaga* Sokol´skii as a pure-hearted soul whose appearance on Sakhalin seems a mistake; but refers to the mass-murderer Poluliakhov as a "natural killer." But the details he subsequently provides about both belie these initial descriptions. Despite sincere efforts to understand and even sympathize with his subjects, Doroshevich could not escape being an outsider, however, even when interviewing such educated offenders as Baroness

Heimbrück or Karl Landsberg. It should therefore be emphasized that his are artistic portraits rather than factually accurate snapshots of these persons.

A second theme running through the feuilletons is autobiographical. Much more than does Chekhov, Doroshevich places himself at the center of his reportage, in a style that renders him a precursor of John Reed or even Hunter S. Thompson.[33] He frequently shares with the reader his impressions of the island and its inhabitants, and builds upon these impressions to produce (in a value-neutral sense) a *sensationalistic* account. His frequent allusions to himself and transcriptions of his own words suggest a narcissistic tendency, particularly when Doroshevich takes ample credit for coining the phrase "*Katorga* begins when it ends." That said, one cannot help but sympathize with most of his observations and feelings.

Another theme is the island itself. Doroshevich's first feuilleton, which I have re-titled "Portraits of Sakhalin,"[34] is an impressionistic account of a quasi-imaginary journey down the length of the island, which he likens to an enormous mottled monster. Throughout the feuilletons the island behaves as a character in its own right, an anthropomorphized demon who, through its control of climate and geography, visits upon inhabitants yet another degree of suffering.

Crime and the supposed "criminal nature" figure as the fourth theme. Book Two especially includes extended descriptions of the crimes that precipitated the deportations of many of Doroshevich's interviewees. Some of Doroshevich's best prose is here, particularly his bone-chilling account of the Poluliakhov killings and his memorializing of "Poet-Murderers." Doroshevich was an established crime reporter before going to Sakhalin, and so his stories of exiled murderers reflect the titillating style of tsarist Russia's boulevard press. He also gives broad license to his fictional skills here—fictionalization having generally characterized pre-revolutionary journalism. These feuilletons are therefore not the kind of *factual* accounts we expect from today's journalists. To again contrast Chekhov's account of Sakhalin: Doroshevich wanted to provide readers a *visceral* understanding and, in so doing, communicate via what were at times obvious fictional devices a knowledge that was no less truthful for its lack of empirical evidence.

This visceral understanding introduces the book's fifth and perhaps major theme, which is that despite their often inhuman (or all too-human, as Nietzsche would have put it) behavior, Sakhalin's convicts are nevertheless human beings, and that this status carries with it certain inalienable rights. At that time, this was not fully appreciated in Russia, where religion and class reinforced an elitist view that equated criminality with a venality supposedly inherent in the underclass. Doroshevich therefore goes to what modern readers may find are excessive lengths to humanize his exiles. There is no small degree

of sentimentality here. Yet, by establishing and reaffirming the basic humanity of those exiled to Sakhalin, he is rejecting both the arbitrary and the systematic violation of human rights that regularly took place throughout the empire. In this regard Doroshevich was not only inspired by, but also perpetuated, a literary campaign to which Lev Tolstoi (like Dostoevskii and Chekhov earlier) contributed with his 1899 novel *Resurrection*, his searing indictment of the penal justice system. Soon after the Sakhalin feuilletons began appearing, A. P. Salomon, a former director of the Main Prison Administration, wrote a similarly scathing exposé of the penal colony for *Prison News* (*Tiuremnyi vestnik*),[35] and in 1903, the jurist N. Ia. Novombergskii published his critical history of Sakhalin.[36] Due in part to these and other publications, the government scaled back its use of exile for a time, but it never voluntarily closed the Sakhalin colony, and, following the 1905 revolution, it increased the numbers it exiled to Siberia generally.

Whether Doroshevich and others would have made a greater impact on Russia's penal development if tsarism had not collapsed is impossible to say, but with so many citizens directly or indirectly affected by tsarist penality, the Sakhalin penal colony clearly helped to discredit the old regime. The popularity of Doroshevich's Sakhalin feuilletons may even have furthered the public's renunciation of the Romanovs. But events after 1917 show that "humanitarianism"—a dirty word for Sakhalin's officials, as Doroshevich repeatedly points out—unfortunately found even less sympathy among the new ruling elite.

Note on the Translation

Doroshevich loved the Russian language, especially the many ways it was variously spoken in late imperial Russia. Like Mark Twain with American English, he recreated regional dialects and colloquialisms, with occasionally baffling results for the reader. But then, ambiguity was part of his style. Given that imperial Russia was a huge territory with many distinct regional vernaculars, I have tried to give individual voices to his characters by expropriating words and pronunciations from different parts of the Anglophone world, though principally the United States, Great Britain and Australia. Both Doroshevich and his characters rely heavily on colloquialisms to communicate. Some of these colloquialisms would make no sense to Anglophone readers, and so I have used rough English-language equivalents for these while retaining verbatim translations of those which, though unfamiliar, can nevertheless be understood. Doroshevich's staccato descriptions of people, places and things are sometimes ambiguous, or at least impressionistic. Many descriptions amount to a single word in Russian. For the

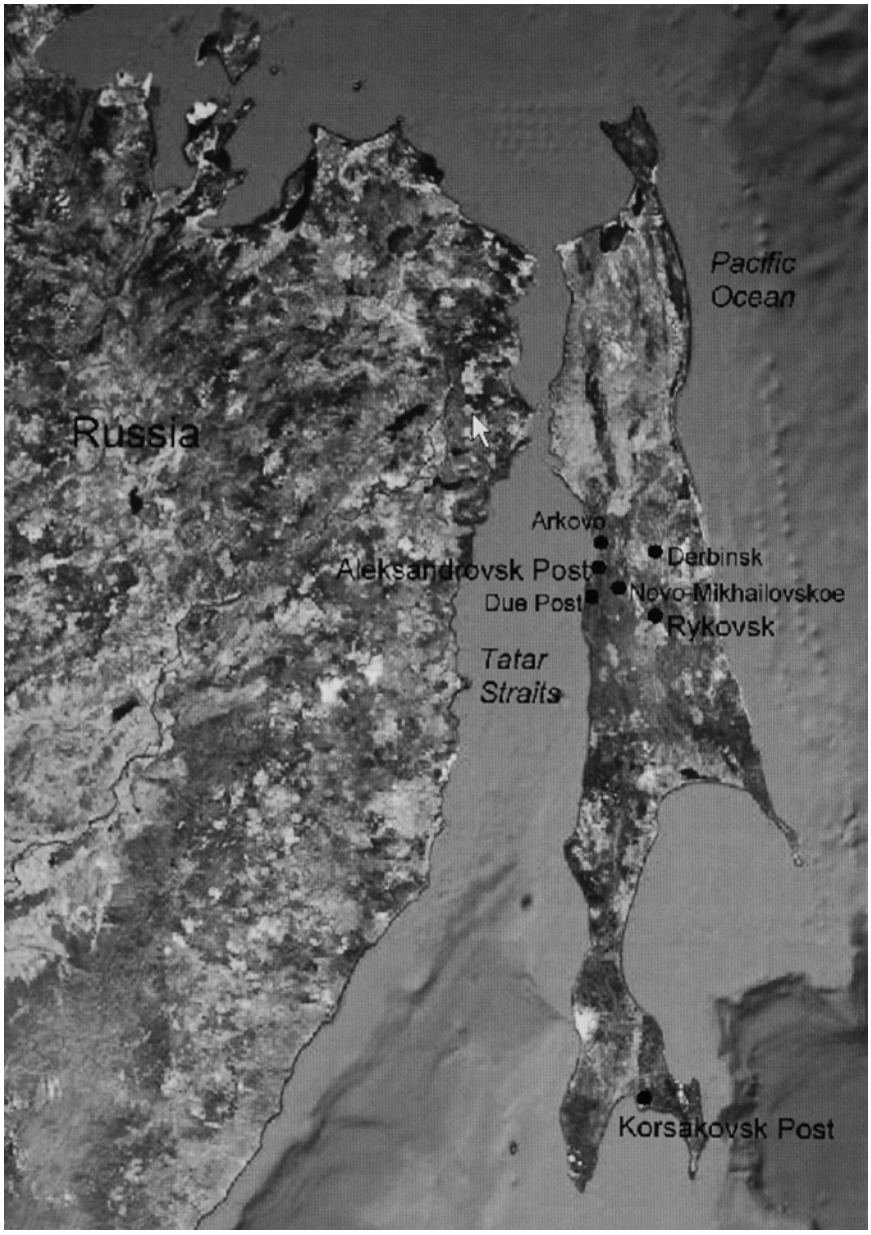

Fig. 2: Map of Sakhalin

sake of comprehensibility, I usually tried to disambiguate such passages while attempting to reproduce the spirit of the original. In a few cases where there seemed no satisfactory English equivalent, I have retained Russian words with which readers may not be familiar and which can be found in the glossary. I will use this opportunity to warn readers ahead of time about my reliance on the convict slang word *fart*. An abbreviation of *fartuna*, which means "luck" and was derived from the English "fortune," *fart* was widely used by exiles both on Sakhalin and in Siberia. The trouble I had as a translator was that Doroshevich goes into detail about this word, explaining that its verbal form (to *fart*) means "to prostitute (oneself)" and that its adverbial form (*fartovyi*) modifies people and things. In the end, I decided to forego trying to find an English substitute and to accept the consequences of using the word strictly transliterated.

Because the feuilletons originated as newspaper dispatches, they lack the polish normally associated with published writing. Here and there it was necessary to correct obvious mistakes.

Finally, I have used a modified version of the Library of Congress's transliteration system for the body of the text, but conformed strictly to the LOC in the introduction, footnotes (including those by Doroshevich) and bibliography. Occasional inconsistencies ("Nikolay," "Nikolai") will, I hope, not prove confusing. All dates correspond to the Julian calendar, in use in Russia until 1918.

Note on the Illustrations

With the exception of Doroshevich's portrait and the map of Sakhalin, the illustrations included here come from those that originally appeared in the 1903 Sytin edition (which had something of a subtitle: "with many illustrations"). Some were photographs of the island and its buildings; but most were apparently the photographs of prisoners known to have been taken by the administration for identification purposes—"mug shots," in other words. A Lombrosian notion of criminal taxonomy clearly informed the decision to illustrate the Sytin edition using these mug shots, for most (despite being of separate individuals) were simply labeled "prisoner types" (*arestantskie tipy*). Only in a few instances were individuals identified by name.

Inclusion in this translation of some of these mug shots does not in any way condone Lombrosianism. On the contrary, the intent is to give a human face to the individuals described within its pages, even if separate faces and individuals cannot be definitively matched.

Russia's Penal Colony in the Far East

Part One

1

PORTRAITS OF SAKHALIN

It was 16 April. The piercing northwest wind was cold and gusty as the steamer lolled from side to side. I stood on the top deck and watched as the bleak, inhospitable rocky shoreline, still covered in snow, came into view. This first impression was gloomy, heavy and oppressive. The island stretched out like some kind of monster, dead and awaiting disposal, with ridges covering its back.

"This is where the *Kostroma* went down," the captain told me.

I descended to the lower deck. Prisoners' faces crowded the deck's portholes as they gazed intently at the shoreline of the island where their lives would end. They gloomily muttered: "Sa*kal*in!"

"It's still winter!"

"Let me see!"

"There's nothing to see. Everything's covered in snow."

The steamer began to rock more violently. We were entering the La Perouse Straits.[1] To the left was the Krilovsky lighthouse; to the right the roiling and frothing boulders of the submerged "Calamity Rock." Straight ahead and drawing near, an ice floe. More ice floes obscured the horizon.

Here indeed was some bitter mockery: to transport people nearly around the globe, to show them a small corner of earthly paradise (magnificent blooming Ceylon), to give them "but a glance" of Singapore, that luxurious, divine, fantastic blooming garden a degree-and-a-half from the equator, to allow—near the entrance to Nagasaki—just a glimpse of Japan's magical and picturesque coast (a coastline you cannot tear your eyes away from), only to deliver them, after all this, to bleak rocky shores still covered in snow as of mid-April, to this land of blizzards, storms, fogs and ice floes—and then to say: "Thrive!"

Sakhalin…

"Water all around, but in the middle—misfortune! Sea all around, but in the middle—woe!" So the penal laborers name it.

"Island of despair. Island without freedom. A dead island!"[2] So it is called by Sakhalin officials.

Fig. 3: Prisoners aboard a steamer

The island is a prison.

If you look at a map of Asia you'll see in the upper right, stretching lengthwise along the coast, something truly resembling a monster that has opened its mouth and appears ready to gobble up Matsmai,[3] lying opposite. Its steep coal-lined cliffs, their zigzagged and broken lines revealing layers of shale, proclaim that some great event has taken place here. The monster's back is ribbed, mottled by gigantic breakers running from northeast to southwest. Not for nothing do Sakhalin's mountains actually resemble enormous, frozen breakers; and the valleys—or "notches" as they say in Siberia—seem like abysses that open between waves during a hurricane. But the hurricane is over. The monster has calmed and shudders here and there only occasionally.

This is an inhospitable island separated from the mainland by the Tatar Straits, the most tempestuous, violent, capricious and spiteful straits in the world. During a winter blizzard it is pitch dark in these straits; and in summer the storms give way to fog so thick a steamer's top-mast can hardly be seen amid the white shroud. A navigator has to travel through these straits fully dressed, snatching just fifteen minutes of sleep at a time, for calm waters can turn into violent storms in a matter of five or ten minutes. At first it's completely calm. Suddenly the rigging begins to whistle and you raise the flags, cut the anchor, and head out to sea if you don't want to be smashed to pieces on the rocks.

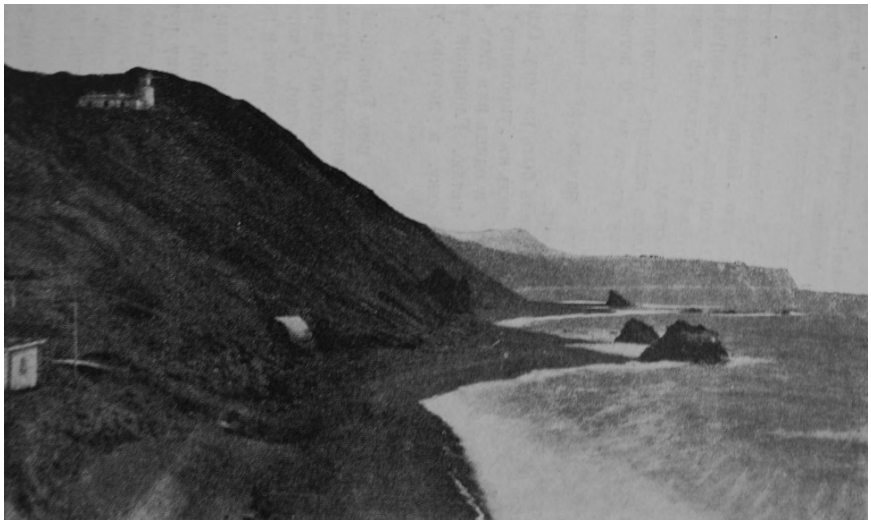

Fig. 4: Sakhalin coastline

The sea here is a traitor. Yet the coast is not a sailor's friend but his enemy. One must fear both land and sea here, for Sakhalin repels and its severe, steep, rocky shores are a foil. Along the entire western shore there isn't a single road in which to harbor: the bottom is smooth and flat flagstone to which no anchor will hold you during a storm. Many steamers are buried in these straits!

Sakhalin is a severe and cold island. Since time immemorial frigid northern currents have forced their way through the Tatar Straits to lap its rocky coast. Winter here is cruel and fierce: a blizzard lasts weeks, churns up huge waterspouts, buries a house up to its roof. Here, the joyless spring resembles autumn; summer is short, cold and foggy; only the autumn is familiar. On 20 May I arrived in Onor, a distant settlement in the very center of the island, and on the 21st I awakened to a bright, fresh, beautiful winter's morning. Snow had fallen that night and a shroud 14 inches deep covered everything—roofs and ground, prison and settlement. The snow stuck around for two days, finally melting on 23 May. And that's what they call the "weather" on Sakhalin.

The monster's sinuous back is covered by thick coniferous taiga, like quills standing on end. The coast's tall, perpendicular, unscalable cliffs are zigzagged by yellow layers of clay, either smoke-colored (from bituminous shale) or white (from sandstone). In places there is the rust of iron ore. Beyond the cliffs is the taiga. Spruce and pine, exposed and completely lacking branches on their windward sides, sprout on one side only. The pine trees have lost their tops to the wind like smoke from a steamer's funnel, and like

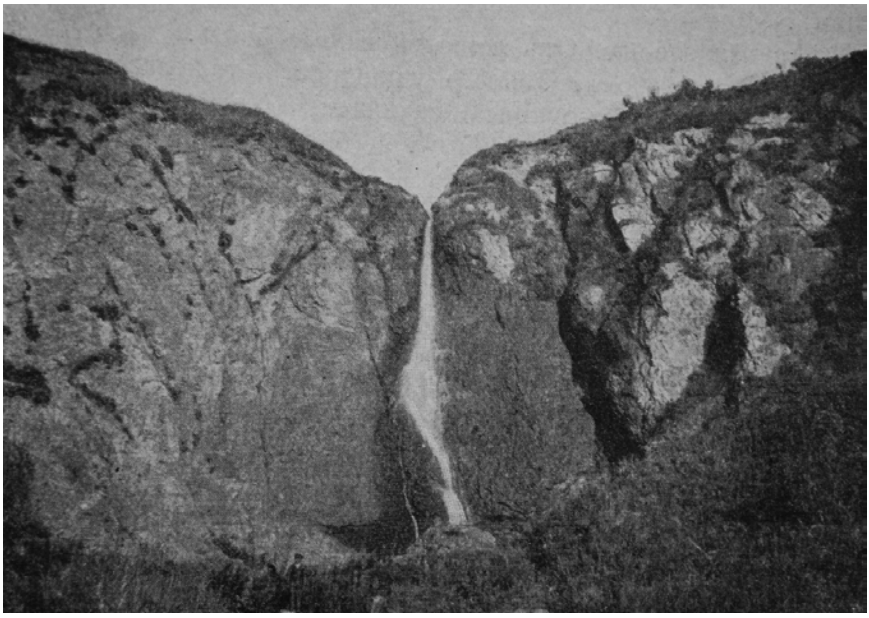

Fig. 5: Waterfall in northern Sakhalin

smoke these great trees, missing arms, flee this terrible shore, this severe, cold, brutal sea and wind.

You clamber into the depths. There is a deathly silence. Only the crunching of wind-fallen branches underfoot. Stop, and there's no sound. No bird sings, not a peep… One is awestruck, as if in an empty church. The silence of the Sakhalin taiga—it is the stillness of a desolate abandoned cathedral beneath whose arches no whispered prayers are heard.

Deeper into this land of eternal silence. Here, there's no light; darkness surrounds you. It's as if a huge baobab were standing atop a dozen tree trunks: winds have pushed the pine-tops together, pinned boughs and needles to each other to form a single enormous carapace, a sturdy roof on which it seems you could walk! It is oppressive here. It is difficult here. Difficult even for the trees. Here, even these giants are ill, their trunks distorted by enormous diseased excrescences.

This is your picture of nature in northern Sakhalin.

Twenty-seven years ago there roamed here both bears and Giliaks—pathetic, unfortunate savages whose intelligence and morals were little better than those of their taiga compatriots. Not without reason do Giliaks believe the bear possesses the same spirit as the Giliak, that following death the bear's spirit goes to its "master," the god of the taiga, to complain to him about the

Fig. 6: Giliak children

Giliaks, but that the master judges both equally. They even believe the bear has "married a Giliak"! For these pathetic savages, this signifies the spiritual equality between them and bears. Bears and Giliaks are now scattered thinly across this land.

Sakhalin's typical settlement is a pitiful sight. Houses built "per-the-law" so as to earn the right to join the peasantry[4] are abandoned, ruined or half-destroyed. No sound here as well. Just eternal silence.

"Anyone living here?" Two or three houses turn out to be inhabited, the rest abandoned. "Well, how's life?"

"What a life! We suffer."

"What do you plant, what do you sow?"

"What grows here! A single potato, and barely just that."

They live in silence, each morose and shut up within himself, miserably hanging on until his term of settlement ends and he can join the peasantry and leave for the mainland, far, far from this gloomy land.

Neighing and crashing into each other, our trio of small, sturdy, swift Sakhalin horses leads us from hill to hill, dale to dale south through the island. The coachman shows you "this is where they killed Kazeev (one of the Artsimoviches' murderers[5])… Here, during a blizzard, the snow buried a woman and her child… I brought the doctor here the other day—they took

an exile-settler down from a tree… Hanged himself… Exile-settler Lavrov was murdered here last year…"

A typical Sakhalin travel route.

The natural picture changes. The sad, northern Sakhalin pine and spruce give way to cheerful, cordial larches, themselves soon surpassed by soft, delicate, aromatic branches of conifer. Birch groves whiten some areas. The birch have yet to blossom, but after the pine forest's gloomy dark-green, the dressing of their white trunks appears so cheerful, elegant and clean. A willow, lithe and weeping, leans over a brook as if peering into its swift currents. Snow still lies in the gullies; but on hillocks warmed by sunlight the burdock is already growing luxuriantly.

The mountains become steeper, the notches broader. There are no more gorges, no gigantic clefts between the mountains but rather spacious plains. The settlements you encounter gradually improve. Trading villages are the larger, and to the question "How's life?" comes the answer: "We get by somehow or other. Only, summers are pretty short." Along the way there are oxen harnessed to a plow. In every settlement you find two, three or more prosperous householders. This is Tymovsk District, in central Sakhalin.

Further on begins the tundra or "trunda," as Sakhalinites call it. The wheels sink and barely turn in the peaty mass. The coachman dismounts and walks alongside so the horses can pull more easily. We're hardly moving; steam pours off the horses.

There's the smell of heather. An asphyxiating, heavy fragrance like the smell of cypress, it gives me a headache. The whole tundra is absolutely covered by its red bushes. Like clotted blood.

The tundra and the taiga. And still not a sound. Only a woodpecker pecks and a cuckoo coos in the distance.

Melancholy—aching, pinching, piercing the soul. Something sad hovers around me. You cannot believe that somewhere in the world there is an Italy, blue sky, warm sun, that there are songs and laughter in the world… Everything ever seen up to now seems so distant, as if on some other planet, as if it were dreamt, unreal, unfeasible.

An ocean of tundra and taiga. And in this ocean tiny little islands, pieces of solid land. Settlements were stuck on these little islands. People tried to live, to struggle, were unable to, and left. Doleful abandoned settlements from here to Onor; and further on nothing but swamps and bogs where dogsleds are needed to travel in winter and you can't get through in summer…

In this region Korsakovsk District begins, in southern Sakhalin. There's a variety of deciduous flora; the climate is comparatively mild. Living and breathing are easier here. If you look at a detailed map, all southern Sakhalin is covered in black dots—these are all settlements. You can at least stand on solid ground here. Labor is difficult but gives some reward.

Here, it is already early spring. Handsome swans stretch in a line flying north. A white border of fish eggs runs like a milky river along the coast up to a mile out to sea, mixing with the seaweed and spawning herring. Birds whistle and call one another in the taiga.

Here, at last, is life, sun and brightness.

These are your pictures of Sakhalin.

Here, the air is filled with heavy sighs. Here, a birdcall at night sounds like a moan. Here, much blood has been shed by wretches who kill each other over a penny. Here, every spot holds terrible memories. Here, everyone exhales suffering. Here, there's been much crime and trouble. Here, you have to fight for everything. Sakhalin's soil yields nothing without sweat and tears being poured into it.

Many riches hide in Sakhalin's depths. Potent strata of coal; there's oil, probably iron. It's even said there's gold. But Sakhalin jealously guards its riches, strongly grips and holds them. It blocks your way through the impenetrable taiga, buries you in its tundra bogs. A man has to make his way here with iron and fire and then, spice the soil with blood and tears and devote half his life to it so the other half might be somewhat tolerable.

This is what this island-prison is like. Nature created it in a moment of spite when what was wanted here was a prison and nothing else. It would be difficult to build better prison walls than the Tatar and La Perouse straits. True, prisoners escape across both. But is there really a prison wall in the world that cannot be over-stepped by a person with a strong enough will?

Yet nature was too cruel when it built this island prison. In clear weather walk along the repellent island's coast and see clearly across the straits the opposite shore that teases and beckons, its blue lines stretching in the distance. Realize that it's so close yet so unattainable. What torment the very weather creates!

2

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

A first impression is always the strongest, and so I'll never forget the moment when, early in the morning and unsteady from the steamer's side-to-side rocking, I walked along the jetty at Korsakovsk Post. People were schooling along the shoreline: several more steps and I would be diving into that sea, so terrifying, yet which I so excruciatingly wanted to know.

A sea of what?

From the three and a half months I spent among penal conditions two impressions are strangely impossible to forget. Two impressions that weighed down, oppressed and sat like lead on my soul. They weigh down and oppress it still.

One was the journey itself to Sakhalin. I've been unable to shut out this comparison: our steamer delivering penal laborers from Odessa seemed a huge scow, like those typically used by coastal cities to ferry garbage out to sea. And Sakhalin's posts and settlements, appearing gray along the shoreline, seemed nothing more than colossal garbage heaps. Knowing there was in the hold beneath your feet a humanity that, in the end, will rot just like you yet nonetheless remain as this "garbage," was heavy on the soul.

The second impression was simply that of Sakhalin. From my very first steps the sight of doleful forced laborers showed I had traveled back fifty years, that what surrounded me was nothing less than serfdom. As I came to know Sakhalin and as this impression lodged ever more deeply in my soul, this initial comparison became all the more valid. The same forced labor, the same people with no rights whatsoever, the degrading punishments, the same pre-Reform regime,[1] the endless bureaucratic red tape, the same appraisal of a person as "living inventory," the same ordering around of a person "per discretion," the same cohabitating through contract marriages as under peasant law (based not on desire or attraction but according to directive, such is the convict so viewed like a peasant)—all of serfdom's old "accouterments," the compulsory "mincing and shuffling"—it all created an utter illusion of that "bygone era."

And how difficult, so very difficult, it was to breathe, may you know!

Wish fulfilled: after proceeding along the jetty I found myself among a crowd of penal laborers working the shoreline. Seventy convicts dressed in

prison uniforms were lowering a barge into the sea to unload a steamer. They were singing "Dubinushka,"[2] and as they sang the barge, seemingly reluctantly, began creeping away from shore. Alongside them on another barge stood the choir's leader, a disheveled, tousled, pathetic, wretched muzhik in a ragged prisoner's jacket singing "Dubinushka" in a broken, ringing tenor that betrayed his requisite versatility and cynical, preternatural resourcefulness. His cynicism had somehow not reached "the limit" but attained a sort of virtuosity.

All this clamor, of course, was meant to cause laughter. But no one was smiling. They listened indifferently, or rather, listened not at all, just sang the refrain by shouting "oooh" somewhat lazily, reluctantly, as if this, too, were a compulsory labor.

I later recovered; but this first impression of forced labor was a heavy and oppressive one.

Others were hauling a fishing net together. They pulled heavily, slowly, reluctantly; a mass of fish was writhing, jumping and quivering in the net. What wasn't there! Colossal gobies, which they don't eat here; *glosy*,[3] oblong with white bellies, which they also don't eat here; lampreys, wriggling like snakes, which they especially don't eat; and small good-for-nothing minnows, which they do eat here. The convicts all stood around the net, then two or three grabbed some of the better fish from out of the bunch with such skill it was like they were tossing stones.

Exile-settlers were greeting each other and mechanically doffing their caps along the entire seashore road from the jetty to the post. I waved my arm in answer to their greetings, and sincerely acknowledged as well those audacious fellows who didn't vouchsafe me the honor of a convict salute. Exile-settlers were wandering about like sleepy houseflies, without any apparent destination or purpose. "They say another steamer's arrived. More of the same." If there was a kind of gravity on the faces of the laborers, then here among the exile-settlers was written a terrible, oppressive, interminable boredom. A melancholy. Such is the condition when a man absolutely does not know what to do with himself, to what to apply himself, but simply watches things pass by, whether it be a large fly, a man or a dog. His eyes may follow something, then the melancholy returns to his face.

Is that a song?…

The droshky in which I was riding turned onto the post's main street and skirted a wooden stage that had been hastily knocked together for Easter celebrations. Beside it were some ragged worn-out swings. Given his cheerless face, that must have been the "entrepreneur" at the entrance. Nearby, a crowd of bored exile-settlers listened without smiles to vulgar jokes from a clown on a theater balcony, a convict in face-paint and baggy calico overalls. Onstage, a choir was wildly mewling a discordant song. Chains were clanging: a convoy of fettered prisoners was marched past the stage… We continued up the post's main street.

Fig. 7: Korsakovsk Post

My first sight of Korsakovsk made, all in all, a winning impression. Nothing seemed like "*katorga.*" This was a clean little city. Administrators' neat inviting homes were laid out in two rows, as if prepared to scamper along the high hills. Highest of all ran the prison. But the prison doesn't *loom* over Korsakovsk. It's one story, not very tall, and regardless of its elevated position neither offends the eye nor dominates or commands the place. In the declivity of two ravines, along both sides of a hill and as if tumbling lazily down the slopes, are little houses. This is the exile-settlers' village. In general, there's nothing "terrible" or dismal in any of this. And so you're prepared to go into raptures over the "facilities," to proceed down Korsakovsk's main street ready to smile and say, "Yes, all this is very, very, so really very nice…"

But wait! Sakhalin is a bog, its surface covered by sparkling emerald grass. It seems a wonderful little meadow—but people take a step and fall into a deep, sucking, clinging cold quagmire. "Nice" cannot exit your mouth, for you hear chains clinking from around a corner. Harnessed to a telega, grasping its shaft, penal laborers are hauling manure. What a depressing impression these people make, performing equine labor. Your path takes you past the prison, where dark grimy windows peer from behind their grilles. Ahead is the infirmary and just across from it, the cemetery.

3

THE INFIRMARY

Later, in Aleksandrovsk and in Rykovsk District, I saw fully outfitted prison hospitals; but what a ghastly place, what a Dantesque evil pit, was this hospital in Korsakovsk Post. I came to know all Sakhalin's "prisons," but the gloomiest was Korsakovsk's infirmary.

A man covered in scabs from an unknown infection is lying side-by-side with a surgery patient. An insane Kirgiz named Naur-Sali is circling them. As with most of Sakhalin's insane, he suffers from megalomania. His is "a protest of the spirit," a "divine affliction." In sum, the disfranchised and poor fancy themselves either the rulers of nature or incalculably wealthy, or in extreme cases even wardens or guards. The Kirgiz Naur-Sali belongs to the incalculably wealthy. He possesses innumerable herds of sheep and camels, earns an inestimable income… But he's surrounded by enemies. Sakhalin's heavy, oppressive environment often produces persecution mania.

It seems that in the past, Naur-Sali's herd was attacked by a pack of wolves that crept upon them through the steppe's feather-grass. His herd was scattered and lost and he was ruined. Now fear distorts and constantly grips the face of Naur-Sali (he's an epileptic and suffers from St Vitus's dance[1]), who weaves from side-to-side shouting and running about the ward, crawling under patients' beds and pulling off their blankets to find his sheep. Imagine the situation for a patient with a broken leg in a splint when the insane Naur-Sali violently tears off his blanket.

"Why aren't they kept separated?"

"Oh, and where should I put them?!" despairingly answers the infirmary's friendly young physician, Kirillov.

It's crowded and stuffy inside the infirmary. Patients lie in corridors due to lack of space. A casualty ward for out-patients is improvised each morning. A screen in the corridor near the outside door protects naked patients from cold and the curiosity of people continually exiting and entering.

"Imagine for yourself how enticing it is in winter, during a frost, to crowd around the entrance and look at the patients," said the doctor. Enticing enough even in springtime.

All of Korsakovsk's infirmary is depressing. Coarse bedclothes are unbelievably filthy, so patients choose to lie in their own underwear. "There's supposed to be soap to wash patients' government-issue bedclothes," shouts the doctor with frustration, "but I'll give my right arm if we've ever seen it!"

There's no ventilation. The air is close and stuffy and you're immediately sickened upon entering. For two days afterward I couldn't lose the oppressive stench that permeated my clothes during my visit.

It's impossible to speak of any kind of operating room. For minor operations, patients are taken to the military hospital. For the more serious, they're sent to Aleksandrovsk Post, which is cut off from Korsakovsk for six months out of the year. I imagined myself a patient who might need a serious operation in November: the first steamer to Aleksandrovsk, the *Iaroslavl*, would not be departing until late April of next year!

When I was in Korsakovsk infirmary's there was no… hygroscopic cotton. To dress wounds, they boiled regular cotton then left it exposed in that atmosphere to be saturated by all possible microbes and bacilli. "All we can boast of is our pharmacy," said the doctor with a sigh of relief. "Thanks to the care and insistence of the director of the medical division, Dr Poddubsky, we now have a fine selection of medicines."

Let us return, however, to the sick.

What pictures, pictures of despair, are on display in this Dantesque purgatory. Consumptives' yellow waxen faces resemble the color of the faded pillows; their eyes burn with a feverish brilliance. Here's some gnome or hideous apparition: face a skull covered with yellowed skin; a shriveled body with humerus bones, clavicles and ribs discernible; abdomen distended and impossibly bloated. He's terrible to look at. The poor man cannot sleep, pain torments him day and night—it inundates him: galloping consumption complicated by dropsy. In his eyes there is such torment, such unbelievable suffering. The poor man—a skeleton drowning in water—whispers something as we approach.

"Sooner! Sooner, I say! Give me something to end it sooner!" It's hardly possible to make out what the gasping man is mumbling.

"No, no. Think what you're saying," the doctor tries to console him. Still greater torment shows on the patient's face. He shakes is head "no."

It's hard to see a person preparing for death in general, but preparing for death here, far from his home, from everyone near and dear, here where no friendly hand will close his eyes, no relative's kiss will touch his lips—here all this is twice, ten times, harder to see.

Here's a patient, a middle-aged man with premature streaks of gray in his hair. His face is handsome, wise, intellectual. What does he suffer from? You don't need a doctor to immediately diagnose his illness from the feverish glint in his eyes, the unnaturally bright blotches on his face, and the huge drops of sweat on his lips. This is an exiled penal laborer from the *brodiagi*, the "*Nepomniashchye*,"[2] a teacher from the village of Vladimirovka.

"You were a teacher in Russia?"

"I was a teacher… Then I wasn't!" he says with a heavy sigh, sorrow crossing his face. He can say no more…

And here's a product of a *katorga* prison, a particular "Sakhalin patient." A young man, it would seem, with a healthy, sturdy constitution, but who's contracted galloping consumption due to exhaustion. Before you is a *zhigan*,[3] a type of *katorga* gambler. Gambling is his illness, a most horrible one, and the natural element he manages to exist in. His lusterless eyes watch everything with the indifferent, careless gaze of the dying and burn with feverish light, real fire, only when he talks about gambling. He's lost everything: his money, his regulation clothes. They punished him with birch rods, stuck him in an isolation cell, but still he gambled. He lost his very self, lost his labor and had to perform double *katorga*, working for both himself and the person he'd lost to. Having gambled away his bread ration for nearly the rest of the year, he's been starving for *months*, eating "from the hand" the weak broth, *balanda*, without bread. They beat him cruelly, furiously, because to gamble he'll steal anything that isn't nailed down. In the end, exhaustion led to him contracting galloping consumption.

He was in the infirmary, gambling with patients and losing his food ration, but stopped and quickly covered up the game when he saw us. Were it not for special observation over him he would gamble away even his own medicines. It seems that Sakhalin's patients are "awarded medicines" and get very little. They readily buy them from each other. The patients surrounding this wretched dying man were themselves so sick and dying they weren't averse to winning his last crust of bread.

Here are some echoes of the winter season, persons whose hands or feet have been frostbitten, some from working in the taiga, others from having recently been on the lam. They unwrap their rags—before us are hands and feet without digits covered in iodine, scabs and oozing sores. When they toss and turn their moans mix with the madmen's delirious idiotic swearing and laughter.

Here's an interesting patient: Iorkin, a former sailor and an epileptic. Lombroso[4] would undoubtedly take his photograph and add him to his collection of tattooed criminals, for Iorkin is tattooed from head to toe. A huge cross is emblazoned on his chest, his arms covered with anchors and crosses, symbols of hope and salvation, and with scriptural quotations. As is typical on Sakhalin, Iorkin's religious mania is accompanied by grandiose delusions.

"I won't be here much longer," he says, eyes alight with ecstasy. "Angels are coming to take me away."

And here's a victim suffering from his family's absence: Karpov, a Don Cossack from Novocherkassk. Today, he is somehow happy, constantly smiling,

and can be talked to. He gladly speaks about one thing only—his family left behind in his homeland; about his brothers, mother, father and wife, how they live and get by. He speaks with enthusiasm, illuminated by his memories. This is a most bright moment for him. Usually, he's seriously depressed and pensive. He's a melancholic and fears attack from demons who want to draw him into immoral behavior. He's abstemious and "watches himself" on behalf of his family. But at night the demons send women to seduce him.

"There are many demons here," he cries in a frail, shrill voice, hiding under the bed and peering about. Where are they?

"There! There! There they are!"

He goes into a seizure.

Guard your pockets. Alongside the doctor and myself this whole time has been Demidov, a kleptomaniac and one of *katorga*'s most pathetic individuals. Fellow prisoners thrashed him to within an inch of his life, so the administration quarantined him. But he remained absolutely "incorrigible." Not long ago, they were giving him fifty-two birch strokes when suddenly, to everyone's astonishment, Dr Kirillov took this "incorrigible scoundrel" to the infirmary.

"Akh, so that's it!" everyone exclaimed. "He's crazy! But we've reformed him."

And here's a victim of our hospitals, a victim of our penchant for "hasty discharges." This is a *brodiaga* who is mute.

"Semen Mikhailovich! How are you?" asks the doctor.

Semen Mikhailovich smiles idiotically and gazes somewhere into a corner.

"What is this? Can he really not talk?"

"No, he suffers from a form of aphasia, and so is unable to speak and in no position to answer questions."

He only smiles foolishly, incapably, pathetically, sufferingly. In a single moment of lucidity, when the ability to speak had momentarily returned, he'd told the doctor his history. He wasn't a *brodiaga* originally. He is Semen Mikhailovich Glukharenkov, a peasant from Novgorod Province. He has family back home. He'd gone to Petersburg to earn money, was stricken with typhoid fever and ended up in hospital. The hospital discharged him too early, when he was too weak. Without a penny and with his passport having been sent to the government "to be exchanged," he had to travel on foot. Having just left city limits he "lost consciousness" and then "it happened." He was arrested, brought to court, but was mute to all questions. He spent six months in *katorga* and was later settled on Sakhalin as "Brodiaga Mute." Such was the little tale Semen Glukharenkov was able to tell the doctor in a moment of lucidity, before again losing himself in silence, before that quiet, mournful smile stole across his face.

Over all this—over the tragic silence of "Brodiaga Mute," low moans emanating from soulful depths, squabbling patients' labored breathing, the *zhigan*'s gambling stories, consumptives' asphyxiated coughs (in which you seem to hear little clumps exploding), the raving and idiotic laughter of madmen—over all this reigns the perpetually incessant cry of a maddened old soldier. There's nowhere in Korsakovsk's infirmary that this terrible cry, irritating your every nerve, cannot reach you. It poisons the final moments of those dying in the small separate ward we've entered. A man lies on a bed… a shadow, a ghost of a man… His face is white, not just pale, as if smeared with cream. His chest wheezes and whistles. He's suffocating. The doctor, explaining his illness as we approached, simply said, "Look for yourself!"

"Doctor… doctor…," says the patient, hardly breathing, his tone that of a child, helpless, pitiful and heart-rending. "Doctor… prescribe me, for God's sake, some mint… I'll improve with some mint."

"Good, good, my friend! I'll prescribe you some mint," the doctor soothed him.

"Yes-yes!… With mint… I'll… get better…"

He would die that evening.

From this small ward we walk down a narrow corridor in the direction of the insane soldier. Chains are clanking at the corridor's entrance.

"Who's that? Patients?"

"No," states a supervisor. "They're here to be certified healthy enough to receive corporal punishment."

These two patients are living out their lives in a small isolation cell here. An old penal laborer, formerly a soldier, answers the question of how many times he's been lashed and beaten in his life: "Seventy-two million, your worship!" He fancies himself a sergeant-major and a field marshal, and the whole of his life is reflected in his gloomy madness: all he does is sentence people to death or to the lash.

"That's him!" he shouts, pointing at the official and tearing his "lunatic shirt" to shreds. "He wanted to tie me up! Hang him within 24 hours! The death sentence is rescinded—sixty thousand lashes without medical assistance! You'll survive!"

Contorted on another bed sleeps a unique creature who sentences no one to death or the lash—an old truculent soldier named Piglet. He's a blind, feeble-minded old man.

"Piglet, attention!" shouts the soldier, and plucks several whiskers from Piglet's beard. Piglet yelps, wakes up, and opens his unseeing eyes. "Piglet, you wanna eat?"

Piglet doesn't answer. Having heard the doctor's voice, he's pondering something.

"Doctor, oh doctor!"

"What do you want?"

"Give me new eyes."

"Very good, I'll do that!"

"You will? Well, good." And Piglet again slips into an old man's reveries.

"You don't wanna eat, Piglet?" wails the old soldier. "It's the supervisor's presence he doesn't want! Hang him this minute! Ready the gallows! Executioner! The lash!"

We enter the women's ward. Here it's somewhat better. "These are women, after all!" explains a midwife. Recently confined women lie beside a pair of idiots smilingly discussing their suitors. The usual women's gibberish on Sakhalin. Nenila, an insane young wench who's all gussied up, approaches the doctor.

"Doctor, can you prescribe me something right now?"

"What for?"

"I'm afraid the guard could go for someone else."

"But with you all dressed up like that?"

"You're right, I'm ready for him!" Nenila laughs.

"She doesn't have a guard at all. Ravings!" the doctor quietly explains to me. "Nenilushka, you'd do better to tell the barin how you came to be here. He wants to know."

Nenila's face suddenly turns morose.

"I was tricked, oh, I was tricked! He completely tricked me, the monster, so that I went along with him! He got me involved and then, off he went. He disappeared! I should be alone?…" Nenila begins crying.

"Don't cry. Tell us what happened."

"What happened? The usual. Some merchant was sitting down, right there. Some drunk merchant. A beard on a table!" Nenila laughs. "I'm next to him, pouring him some more. 'Drink,' I says, 'you dirty so-and-so!' And my mate sneaks up behind him… Snuck up to the merchant—that drunk, stinking drunk merchant! I grab hold of his arms. My mate gets hold of his beard—pulls it back—and slits his throat! Aiee!" Nenila screams. Perhaps that was the terrible moment when she "lost the balance" of her psyche. "Blood on the wall, splashed on me, on me… The merchant made such a horrible face… Horrible…" Nenila begins to whimper and wipe away tears, then suddenly bursts out laughing. "Why am I howling like a fool? What a fool, such a fool! How ridiculous. I'm howling like a little girl and don't know why! Doctor, let me see the guard."

"Give me a small drop of wisdom," another lunatic says, approaching. This unfortunate woman was exiled to *katorga* for murdering her husband. She lost her psychic equilibrium on her wedding night.