

VARLAM SHALAMOV

BEFORE YOU ARE TWO TEXTS. THE FIRST AT THE BEGINNING OF THE 60s OF THE LAST CENTURY WAS CREATED BY VARLAM SHALAMOV (1907-1983) – A WRITER WHO SAT THROUGH 20 YEARS IN THE STALINIST CAMPS, INCLUDING 17 ON THE KOLYMA. PEOPLE OFTEN COMPARE SHALAMOV WITH SOLZHENITSYN – ALTHOUGH BY SCALE IT IS MORE CORRECT TO BETTER COMPARE HIM WITH DANTE.

With the difference that Dante invented hell, while Varlam Shalamov went through it, subsequently describing the hellish existence – clearly, precisely, in all its everyday-repulsive details. What Shalamov did lies almost beyond the limit of human capabilities – it is a miracle not only that this person survived after 17 years of the Kolyma, but also that, having come out from hell, he found in himself the strength and the desire to speak. The tale “What I saw and understood in camp” represents a compilation of knowledge lying beyond the pale of earthly experience, as well as of a unique life philosophy, extremely harsh, devoid of any hopes and illusions relative to human nature. To read Shalamov – is heavy work. Nevertheless, to do it is absolutely imperative – at the very least in order not to repeat the hell.

“WHAT I SAW AND UN

THE EXTRAORDINARY EVANESCENCE OF HUMAN CULTURE, CIVILIZATION. A PERSON BECAME A BEAST IN THREE WEEKS – UNDER HEAVY WORK, COLD, HUNGER AND BEATINGS.

THE MAIN MEANS OF DEFILEMENT OF THE SOUL – COLD, IN THE CENTRAL ASIAN CAMPS, PROBABLY, PEOPLE HELD ON LONGER – IT WAS WARMER THERE.

I HAVE UNDERSTOOD THAT FRIENDSHIP, COMRADESHIP NEVER ARISES IN DIFFICULT, TRULY DIFFICULT – WHEN LIFE IS ON THE LINE – CONDITIONS. FRIENDSHIP ARISES IN CONDITIONS THAT ARE DIFFICULT, BUT POSSIBLE (IN A HOSPITAL, BUT NOT AT A SLAUGHTER).

I HAVE UNDERSTOOD THAT A PERSON HOLDS ON TO THE SENSE OF SPITE LATER THAN EVERYTHING ELSE. THE MEAT ON A HUNGRY PERSON IS ENOUGH ONLY FOR SPITE – TOWARDS EVERYTHING ELSE HE IS INDIFFERENT.

I HAVE UNDERSTOOD THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN JAIL, WHICH STRENGTHENS THE CHARACTER, AND CAMP, WHICH DEFILES THE HUMAN SOUL.

I HAVE UNDERSTOOD THAT THE STALINIST “VICTORIES” WERE GAINED BECAUSE HE KILLED INNOCENT PEOPLE – AN ORGANIZATION TEN TIMES SMALLER IN NUMBER, BUT AN ORGANIZATION, WOULD HAVE SWEEPED STALIN AWAY IN TWO DAYS.

I HAVE UNDERSTOOD THAT MAN BECAME MAN BECAUSE HE IS PHYSICALLY STRONGER, MORE TENACIOUS THAN ANY ANIMAL – NO HORSE IS ABLE TO WITHSTAND WORK IN THE EXTREME NORTH.

I AM CONVINCED THAT THE ONLY GROUP OF PEOPLE THAT HELD ITSELF AT LEAST A TINY BIT HUMANLY IN HUNGER AND OUTRAGES – THIS IS THE RELIGIOUS ONES – SECTARIANS – NEARLY ALL AND A LARGE PART OF THE PRIESTS.

EASIEST OF ALL, THE FIRST TO BREAK ARE THE PARTY WORKERS, THE MILITARY.

I HAVE SEEN WHAT A WEIGHTY ARGUMENT AN ORDINARY FLOOZY CAN BE FOR AN INTELLECTUAL.

THAT THE PEOPLE DISTINGUISH SUPERIORS BY THE POWER OF THEIR BLOW, THE FERVOR OF BEATING.

BEATINGS AS AN ARGUMENT ARE NEARLY IRREBUTTABLE (METHOD No. 3).

MIKHAIL KHODORKOVSKY

SPECIALLY
FOR GQ

THE SECOND TEXT BELONGS TO THE PEN OF MIKHAIL KHODORKOVSKY – AN INMATE, AT THE PRESENT TIME SERVING PUNISHMENT IN THE COLONY OF THE CITY OF KRASNOKAMENSK. THE GQ EDITORIAL STAFF ASKED MR. KHODORKOVSKY TO DESCRIBE HIS OWN CAMP EXPERIENCE – LIKE SHALAMOV IN THE FORM OF SHORT MAXIMS.

We acknowledge that by the level of the nightmare happening with a person, the Kolyma of 1937 and Krasnokamensk of 2009 – are not comparable. Nevertheless, the experience of our contemporary says much about the currently existing formation of hell, which is not blood, death and shit, but boredom, treachery, decay and other everyday human beastliness.

DERSTOOD IN CAMP”

CAMP – THIS IS AN ANTI-WORLD. HERE LYING – IS THE NORM, TRUTH – THE EXCEPTION.

HERE IN OUR COUNTRY WE HAVE NO SMALL NUMBER OF TRULY COMPLETELY ILLITERATE ADULT PEOPLE!

IF THE EMPLOYEES OF A CAMP WERE TO TRADE PLACES WITH ITS “INHABITANTS”, NOTHING WOULD CHANGE. INDEED THIS FACT IS ADMITTED BY REPRESENTATIVES OF BOTH “SIDES”.

LIFE IN CAMP SMACKS OF NOSTALGIA FOR THE USSR: NOBODY WORKS, BUT THEY PRETEND TO; THEY DON'T PAY ANYBODY, BUT THEY PRETEND TO. EVERYBODY TOGETHER LIES TO ALL “OUTSIDERS”, THEY HOLD THE LOCAL “SEEKERS OF THE TRUTH” IN THE LOCAL “CALABOOSE”.

PEOPLE ARE READY TO DO A LOT OF THINGS FOR FOOD, EVEN WHEN, IN GENERAL, THEY ARE NOT STARVING.

THE ONLY ONES WHO KNOW HOW TO SKILFULLY LIE TO A COURT ARE OPERATIVES. ORDINARY PEOPLE SAY WHAT THEY CONSIDER TO BE THE TRUTH. IF THEY LIE – THEIR LYING IS VISIBLE.

LIFE – IS A VERY CHEAP THING.

INTRIGUES IN CAMP RESEMBLE KREMLIN ONES, THE DIFFERENCE – ONLY IN THE SCALES.

THERE IS NO SMALL NUMBER OF THOSE FOR WHOM HONOR IS MUCH MORE DEAR THAN LIFE.

CAMP SUBSTITUTES FOR UNIVERSITY FOR CRIMINALS: THIS IS BOTH EDUCATION AND CONNECTIONS.

IN THE REALM OF NARCOTICS, LAGGING BEHIND THE USA HAS BEEN SUCCESSFULLY OVERCOME. THE CAMPS HAVE “SURGED WAY AHEAD”.

THE “BOSS” – IS TSAR, GOD, AND WARLORD. AS LONG AS HE DOESN'T INTERFERE WITH STEALING. EVERYBODY STEALS. EVERYTHING. WELL, ALMOST...

OPINION

I HAVE LEARNED THE TRUTH ABOUT THE PREPARATION OF SECRET TRIALS FROM THE MASTERS OF THESE AFFAIRS.

I HAVE UNDERSTOOD WHY IN JAIL THEY LEARN ABOUT POLITICAL NEWS (ARREST ETC.) EARLIER THAN AT LIBERTY.

I HAVE LEARNED THAT A JAIL (AND CAMP) "PISSBUCKET" IS NEVER A "PISSBUCKET".

I HAVE UNDERSTOOD THAT ONE CAN LIVE ON SPITE.

I HAVE UNDERSTOOD THAT ONE CAN LIVE ON INDIFFERENCE.

I HAVE UNDERSTOOD WHY A PERSON LIVES NOT ON HOPES – THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS HOPES, NOT ON WILL – WHAT IS WILL ANYWAY, BUT ON INSTINCT, A SENSE OF SELF-PRESERVATION – ON THAT SAME FOUNDATION AS A TREE, A STONE, AN ANIMAL.

I AM PROUD THAT I DECIDED AT THE VERY START, STILL BACK IN THE YEAR OF 1937, THAT I WOULD NEVER BE A BRIGADE LEADER, IF MY WILL COULD LEAD TO THE DEATH OF ANOTHER PERSON – IF MY WILL HAS TO SERVE THE BRASS, OPPRESSING OTHER PEOPLE – THE SAME KIND OF ARRESTEES AS MYSELF.

BOTH MY PHYSICAL AND SPIRITUAL STRENGTH HAS TURNED OUT TO BE STRONGER THAN I HAD THOUGHT, – IN THIS GREAT TRIAL, AND I AM PROUD THAT I DID NOT SELL ANYONE OUT, DID NOT SEND ANYONE TO DEATH, FOR A TERM, DID NOT WRITE A DENUNCIATION OF ANYBODY.

I AM PROUD THAT I DID NOT WRITE A SINGLE APPLICATION UNTIL THE YEAR 1995 (*IN 1955 SHALAMOV WROTE AN APPLICATION FOR REHABILITATION*).

I HAVE SEEN THE SO-CALLED BERIA AMNESTY ON LOCATION – AND IT WAS A SIGHT TO SEE.

I HAVE SEEN THAT WOMEN ARE MORE DECENT, MORE SELFLESS THAN MEN – ON THE KOLYMA THERE ARE NO INSTANCES WHERE A HUSBAND HAD COME FOR A WIFE. BUT WIVES DID COME, MANY (FAÏNA RABINOVICH, WIFE OF KRIVOSHEY) (*SEE THE SKETCH "THE GREEN PROCURATOR", COLL. WKS., V. 1, P. 531-571*).

I HAVE SEEN AMAZING NORTHERN FAMILIES (FREE-HIRES AND FORMER INMATES) WITH LETTERS TO "LAWFUL HUSBANDS AND WIVES" ETC.

I HAVE SEEN THE "FIRST ROCKEFELLERS", UNDERGROUND MILLIONAIRES, HEARD THEIR CONFESSIONS.

I HAVE SEEN HARD-LABOR-IN-EXILE CONVICTS, AS WELL AS A MULTITUDE OF "CONTINGENTS" "D", "B" AND SO FORTH, "BERLAG".

I HAVE UNDERSTOOD THAT ONE CAN ATTAIN A GREAT DEAL – THE HOSPITAL, A TRANSFER, BUT TO RISK LIFE – BEATINGS, THE PUNISHMENT DUNGEON ICE. I HAVE SEEN THE ICE DUNGEON, HEWN INTO A CLIFF, AND HAVE MYSELF SPENT ONE NIGHT IN IT.

THE PASSION OF POWER, OF FREE KILLING IS GREAT – FROM BIG PEOPLE TO RANK-AND-FILE OPERATIVES – WITH A RIFLE (*SEROSHAPKA, SEE THE STORY "BERRIES", COLL. WKS., V. 1, P. 54-56, AND ONES LIKE IT*).

THE IRREPRESSIBLE INCLINATION OF THE RUSSIAN PERSON TO DENOUNCE, TO COMPLAIN.

I HAVE LEARNED THAT THE WORLD NEEDS TO BE DIVIDED NOT INTO GOOD AND BAD PEOPLE, BUT INTO COWARDS AND NON-COWARDS. 95% OF COWARDS UNDER A WEAK THREAT ARE CAPABLE OF ALL MANNER OF NASTINESS, DEADLY NASTINESS.

I AM CONVINCED THAT CAMP – THE WHOLE THING – IS A NEGATIVE SCHOOL, ONE MUST NOT SPEND EVEN AN HOUR IN IT – THIS IS AN HOUR OF DEFILEMENT, CAMP HAS NEVER AND CAN NOT EVER HAVE GIVEN ANYBODY ANYTHING POSITIVE. ON EVERYBODY – INMATES AND FREE-HIRES – CAMP HAS A DEFILEING EFFECT.

EVERY OBLAST HAD ITS OWN CAMPS, AT EVERY CONSTRUCTION SITE.

MILLIONS, TENS OF MILLIONS OF INMATES.

THE REPRESSIONS TOUCHED NOT ONLY THE TOP, BUT ANY STRATUM OF SOCIETY – IN ANY VILLAGE, AT ANY PLANT, IN ANY FAMILY THERE WERE EITHER RELATIVES OR ACQUAINTANCES REPRESSED.

THE BEST TIME OF MY LIFE I CONSIDER THE MONTHS SPENT IN A CELL OF THE BUTYRKA JAIL, WHERE I MANAGED TO STRENGTHEN THE SPIRIT OF THE WEAK AND WHERE EVERYBODY SPOKE FREELY.

I HAVE LEARNED HOW TO "PLAN" LIFE A DAY AHEAD, NO MORE.

I HAVE UNDERSTOOD THAT THIEVES – ARE NOT PEOPLE.

THAT IN CAMP THERE ARE NO CRIMINALS, THAT SITTING THERE ARE PEOPLE WHO HAD BEEN BESIDE YOU (AND WILL BE TOMORROW), WHO HAVE BEEN CAUGHT BEYOND THE LINE, AND NOT THOSE WHO HAVE CROSSED THE LINE OF THE LAW.

I HAVE LEARNED WHAT A FRIGHTFUL THING – IS THE VANITY OF A BOY, A YOUTH: BETTER TO STEAL THAN TO ASK, VAINGLORIOUSNESS AND THIS SENSE CAST BOYS DOWN TO THE BOTTOM.

WOMEN IN MY LIFE DID NOT PLAY A BIG ROLE – CAMP IS THE REASON FOR THIS.

THAT KNOWING PEOPLE – IS USELESS, FOR I CAN NOT CHANGE MY BEHAVIOR IN RELATION TO ANY OLD SCOUNDREL.

THE LAST ONES IN THE RANKS, WHOM EVERYBODY DESPISES, – BOTH THE CONVOYERS AND THE COMRADES, – THE LAGGARDS, THE SICK, THE WEAK, THOSE WHO CAN NOT RUN IN THE FROST.

I HAVE UNDERSTOOD WHAT IS POWER AND WHAT IS A PERSON WITH A GUN.

THAT THE SCALES HAVE BEEN SHIFTED, AND THIS – IS THE MOST CHARACTERISTIC FOR CAMP.

THAT TO TRANSITION FROM THE STATE OF AN INMATE TO THE STATE OF A FREE PERSON IS VERY DIFFICULT, NEARLY IMPOSSIBLE WITHOUT A LENGTHY AMORTIZATION.

THAT A WRITER MUST BE A FOREIGNER – IN THE QUESTIONS HE IS DESCRIBING, BUT IF HE KNOWS THE MATERIAL WELL – HE WILL WRITE IN SUCH A WAY THAT NOBODY WILL UNDERSTAND HIM.

OH, AND ANOTHER THING, CAMP – THIS IS THE USSR WHEN IT COMES TO FREE MEDICINE. IT IS VERY FREE, BUT NOT VERY MEDICAL.

THOSE WHO WAX NOSTALGIC FOR SOVIET WAYS – I INVITE ON AN EXCURSION. VERY SOBERING!
EDUCATION AND SKILLS WILL ALWAYS BE USEFUL. GOD SEES EVERYTHING!

STRENGTH OF WILL AND STRONG NERVES ARE MORE IMPORTANT THAN JUST STRENGTH, EVEN IN JAIL.

THE GULAG HAS DIED, BUT THE TRADITIONS AND HABITS HAVE OUTLIVED THE USSR, HAVING LOST THEIR MEANING.

I HAVE REMEMBERED WHAT QUEUES TO THE STALL FOR PRODUCTS AND SOAP ARE. "SIGN UP", "COME BY IN A MONTH, PERHAPS THERE WILL BE TOOTHPASTE", "DO NOT OCCUPY ANY MORE FOR TEA..."

ALMOST EVERYBODY HAS SOMETHING SACRED IN THE SOUL. SOMETIMES – VERY DEEP, BUT YOU CAN ALWAYS LEAN ON THIS. IF THERE IS NO SUPPORT – THERE IS NO PERSON. THE SHELL IS EMPTY. YOU CAN SEE IT.

THE REGIME, STATE PROVISION, ABSENCE OF WORK AND LOSS OF TIES WITH FAMILY – LIKE A SPECIALLY MADE CONVEYOR FOR THE FORMATION OF A CRIMINAL "INFANTRY".

90% OF INMATES HAVE NOBODY "OUTSIDE THE GATES" WHO NEEDS THEM, NOBODY EVEN WRITES THEM.

RUSSIANS – ARE EXTREME INDIVIDUALISTS.

AFTER FIVE YEARS A PERSON GETS USED TO JAIL. AFTER TEN – HE IS AFRAID OF FREEDOM.

FOR THOSE WHO UNDERSTAND THEY ARE SITTING FOR A REASON – IT IS EASIER.

FOR THOSE WHO DON'T THINK ABOUT FREEDOM, IT IS EASIER TO SIT, BUT TO GET OUT – HARDER.

IN JAIL THE MIND, THE SENSES WORK MORE ACUTELY – "SENSORY DEPRIVATION".

EACH INDIVIDUAL DAY GOES BY SLOWLY, MONTHS AND YEARS FLY BY UNNOTICED.

IN ORDER TO ATTAIN ONE'S OWN, ONE NEEDS TO BE PREPARED TO GO ALL THE WAY. THEN EVERYTHING IS POSSIBLE. BUT FALSENESS DOESN'T CUT IT.

IN CAMP TO STICK OUT FROM THE "MASS" IS ALWAYS DANGEROUS AND NEARLY ALWAYS BAD. BUT ONE CAN ATTAIN RESPECT.

THE MAJORITY IN CAMP IS SEEKING SUBORDINATION AND CONCERN, FORGIVING THE "BRASS" EVEN PETTY DESPOTISM AND STUPIDITY.

IF THE CHINESE PROMISE TO PAY AN ALLOWANCE – ALL OF SIBERIA WILL GO OVER TO CHINA. ONLY OLD BELIEVERS AND THE BRASS WILL STAY.

A RUSSIAN PERSON IS VERY TALENTED AND HARDWORKING. WHEN HE'S SOBER.

IN CAMP BOTH VODKA AND WORK – ARE IN SHORT SUPPLY.

THE PURSUIT OF THINGS – IS VOLUNTARY INSANITY.

A PERSON REALLY NEEDS VERY LITTLE.

MERCANTILISM AT LIBERTY IS OFTEN DANGEROUS, IN CAMP – LAUGHABLE.

THE ONLY ITEM THAT I MISS – IS A COMPUTER. THEN AGAIN MY PENMANSHIP HAS IMPROVED.

RUSSIAN SOCIETY AND THE RUSSIAN CRIMINAL WORLD COMPETE IN INHUMANITY TOWARDS ONE ANOTHER. IT IS BOTH FRIGHTENING TO WATCH, AND VICTORY IS IMPOSSIBLE.

NOBODY BELIEVES JUDGES.

THE MAJORITY BELIEVES JURIES.

PEOPLE! WE MUST NOT LIVE LIKE THIS, IF WE – ARE PEOPLE!

PATRIOTISM WAS THOUGHT UP BY THE INTELLIGENTSIA.

CAMP – IS A BIG VILLAGE. EVERYBODY KNOWS EVERYTHING.