

Conditions in a Political Prison in Russia.(1) Brief Background of Respondent's Imprisonment.

During the 2nd world war I served as a corporal in the Hungarian Army. At the end of the war I was taken prisoner by the American troops. In 1945 I returned to Hungary and worked as a handicraftsman and artisan mostly in connection with fine leather work.

During this time I kept contact with some of the friends I made while an American POW.

Because of my American contacts I was taken ~~xy~~ away by the AVO in 1949 and was subsequently turned over to the Russian AVO or NVD as the Russians used to call it. The alleged charge was~~x~~ that I passed on important information to the Americans concerning Russian troop movements in Hungary. This was a complete fabrication. It was true that I have had many American friends but I did not participate in any espionage. In the same year I was sent ~~into~~ ~~x~~ Lemberg in Poland and was put into a big concentration camp, where hundreds of other political prisoners were assembled by the Russians. After some time, we were ~~camped~~ into waggons and were shipped to Soviet Russia where I ~~was~~ was ^asummonly sentenced to life imprisonment for espionage. ^AActually this ment 25 years of hard labour.

The reason why I didn't get~~the~~ the death penalty was that there was no capital punishment in Soviet Russia in 1949. They reintroduced it the following year.

(2) The Nature of Russian Political Trials.

From what I could see, in view of my own experience, I would say that the Russian political trials do not resemble any Western democratic trials. There is no due process, there seem to be no rules of evidenceⁿ and there is no opportunity for presenting the case of the defense. My whole trial took actually only a few minutes. I was simply told of the charge against me, ~~the whole thing was over in a few minutes~~ and then the judgement and sentence were communicated to me in summary. The whole thing seemed to me a mock trial. At that time I could not understand its significance. It took me years to see through the purpose of these trials and large scale imprisonments.

(3) Nature and Purpose of Mock Trials and Large Scale Imprisonments.

Later when I saw how many millions of Russians and other nationalities were working in forced labour camps and mines, I finally understood the nature and purpose of mock trials and large scale imprisonments. The charge, the trial, the judgement and sentence^F were

not important. For the slightest violations of ordinances people would receive unbelievably high prison terms. During my stay in Soviet Russia ~~and~~ I had talked to hundreds of such Russians, I had also heard that in 1945 about 50,000 Hungarians were taken to Soviet Russia and most of them died in labour camps. For a while I couldn't understand what was behind all this, ~~finally~~, when I got into the mill myself I did understand it. The reason was that the mass of political prisoners provided a tremendous slave labour or ~~the~~ cheap labour for Russia and ^{I am} quite sure that there must be about 45 to 50,000,000 people in Russia who are working in hard labour camps. I talked to hundreds of Russians both while I was a prisoner and later when I was released and I could not find anybody whose members of ^{THEIR} family had not been ~~had not been~~ imprisoned ^{AT} one time or another.

(4) Location of and General Condition in Respondent's Camp in 1949.

Having been sentenced to life ~~in~~ imprisonment in 1949, I was then taken with many others to Alma Ote near ~~XXXXXX~~ Kazakhstan in a coppermine camp. Kazakhstan, I believe, is about 500 km from the Chinese ~~Iranian~~ and Afghanistany borders. It is located at the Eastern corner of Jaskazgan. Two years before our arrival in the camp

Japanese prisoners of war were working there. The camp was in an extremely ~~bad~~^{poor} condition. Our dwelling consisted of wooden structures with earthen roofs. There was no glass in the windows, but they were nailed down~~ed~~ with wood. There was no heating and the sleeping arrangement was so tight that you couldn't even stretch your legs without kicking someone else. There were about 190 people jammed in ~~in~~ a large room which was originally designed ~~to accommodate~~^{to accommodate} 82 people. Also, there was no straw to sleep on. The whole camp was surrounded with ~~barbed~~^{bar} wires and ~~was~~ border fences. At that time, I had a strong feeling that we could ~~not~~ never survive. It seemed to me as if hell had come to earth.

(5) Meals and Food.

We had two meals a day. One in the morning before work and the other in the evening after we came back from the mine to the camp. The meals were extremely inadequate and monotonous to say the least. As a result we were undernourished and lost weight to the extent that only our bones remained. Usually for about 3 months we ~~would~~ get 120 gr. of oat meal porridge at each meal, then for another 3 months we would receive the same amount of

The reason for this arrangement was that the waggons carrying food came only once every 3 months and contained only one kind of food. In addition to the above we also received 500 gr. of watery soup without meat (in later years occasionally with bones in it). Finally we received 90 gr. of bread daily. If you overfulfilled your worknorm, you could get 10 to 15 gr. of additional bread depending on how much of your overfullfillment of worknorm amounted to percentagewise.

(6) Working Conditions.

There were about 7,000 inmates in the camp in the 1949, out of these there were 125 Hungarians. 120 of them were released in 1953 and only 5 of us were kept for another 2 years.

We worked in several shifts (500 men in each). To facilitate our work and feeding, we had to work 12 hours a day down in the copper mines where we were driven over by our guards. The mine, unlike the camp, was under civilian management with 6 directors for different sectors of the mine. The directors had officially asked the camp commandant for the labour force and they paid the camp for our work, in order to contribute ~~for~~ ~~our~~ to our maintenance cost in the camp.

Down in the mines we worked under the strict supervision of the brigade leader. Usually, he was a tough character whose only interest was to fulfill or overfulfill the norms and as a result of his tough attitude he was hated by the workers. As a brigade leader, he received extra food rations. In addition he also had sleeping and other facilities. In discharging his functions he frequently beat up the workers and many of them died of severe injuries. Such conditions infuriated the workers so much that they killed a couple of brigade leaders. After that the attitude of the brigade leaders became much milder, ~~Actually~~, what happened was that they got scared. People who had received life imprisonments and lived under such miserable conditions felt that they would die anyway because of the inhuman treatment and terrible working conditions. So the workers felt that nothing worse could happen to them ^{if} ~~if~~ they killed the brigade leaders.

The working norms were set extremely high and were rigorously ~~and~~ ~~enforced~~ ^{enforced} by the brigade leader. I had to mine 11 tons of copper a day. I worked with my hands without the use of machines. The 11 ~~ton~~ tons were established for manual work. There was no possibility of cheating because each worker had to ~~put~~ put the copper ~~x~~ that he had mined on his own waggon.

If the waggon was full that amounted to 11 pounds of copper a period. I should add however, that the norm was not a permanent figure but it was constantly increased, ~~As~~ I already pointed out the 11 tons were established for manual work, later, when small machines were introduced and used, the norms were correspondingly increased. Also, I should mention another practice. If for instance you constantly overfulfilled your norm, the brigade leader would immediately ~~raise~~ raise the norm. Also, if the brigade leader favoured or disliked somebody, he could take away from his norm fulfillment and add the amount to someone else's norm under some pretext.

If someone got sick or passed out during work because of ~~a~~ exhaustion, this was reported to a camp doctor. The doctor would then give him a ~~pre~~fundary examination, ~~he~~ would feel him around his sitting bone ^{to see} whether or not the worker had any flesh left there. If he did he was sent back to work, unless he had high fever or signs of contagion.

(7) Improvements.

During the years ~~for~~ from 1950 to 1955, our situation slowly but gradually improved somewhat due mostly to our own efforts. After work, in our spare time, we started putting up new barracks. We built European types of wooden roofs in lieu of the old horizontal

earthen roofs. We also changed the windows so that ~~we~~ they could be opened (formerly they were nailed down). We also had to build 4 m high stone walls in lieu of the old ~~stone~~ board fences.

In 1951 for the first time we received 3 days off in a month. The days off were rotated because we worked in shifts. In 1952 this number was increased to 4.

In 1953, after Stalin's death we even received a small wage for our work. I should add however, that the greater part of this pay was withheld to cover our so called ~~our so-called~~ "lodging and board" in the camp. We were allowed, however, to use the rest of the money in the form of coupons in the local canteen of the camp to buy whatever food happened to be available. Also, after 1953 the German and Russian inmates were allowed to receive parcels from home. The other nationalities had no such privileges. After 1953 we were allowed to write home and we also received mail occasionally.

By 1953 we built a reading room in our spare time in which the Moscow papers could be read. We were also allowed to go ~~in~~ once or twice to the camp movie to see some propaganda films ^{for} free~~ly~~. Later on, when we received wages, we had to pay for the movie tickets. Also, on another occasion, we were allowed to see a

theatre group play in the camp.

In the character^{of} the ~~xxx~~ norm system, there were also some improvements in the later years. To give you an example ~~xx~~ for instance, if you overfulfilled your norm you could be allowed to count the percentagewise overfulfillment of your norm towards your prison term on the basis of a given key or ratio. ~~xxxx~~ I heard that the best ratio applicable in Russia was at the works of the Volga Canal. There, for every extra ~~xx~~ day of work (that is, a 100% ~~xx~~ overfulfillment of your norm per day), ^{you could} deduct seven days from your prison time. In our term this ratio varied from 2 to 3 days, deduction for every extra day of work.

(8) Camp Strikes in 1954.

In spite of the mentioned improvements in 1954 a strike broke out in the Kingir camp which was located about 28 miles from our camp. The Kingir camp provided the man power for the second greatest copper smelting factory in the world. (I don't know whether it is, in fact the second greatest factory. However, everybody there said that it ^{was} ~~is~~. I have never been there but I understand that it is entirely electrified.)

Despite the great official secrecy surrounding the strike and its circumstances, it was not too difficult ~~for~~ for the ~~in~~ inmates of our camp to find out everything that had happened there. Though our guards were afraid

of talking to us about what was going on outside the camp, there were quite a few free civilians working in the mine and in the camp, such as the mechanic, those who were in charge of food and other supplies, and many others. We were on ~~fair~~ fairly good terms with them and they would bring us news about what was going on. The strike in the Kingir camp broke out on May 10 th 1954 and lasted over 40 days. Finally, tanks were sent in and the prisoners were fired at. They died like flies. We heard that the strike there broke out because 200 regular criminals were thrown into the camp and the inmates, mostly political prisoners, protested against this. They did not want to get mixed up with regular criminals, burglars and thieves. One reason for their reluctance was that the regular criminal criminals hardly ever worked or if they did they never fulfilled their norm requirements. As a result, the brigade leaders had to make the other prisoners work harder in order to make up for the difference. Also, the prisoners had many other grievances in the Kingir camp and demands in connection with norms, food etc., none of which was fulfilled. The situation soon got out of hand and the business managed to break into the women's sector of the camp (in our camp there were no women prisoners). Special emissaries came from

Moscow, high thinking Army officers and other officials, but no matter what they did they couldn't get the workers back to work. The strike was so successful that they could not break it no matter what they tried. Finally they had to send in tanks and a real battle developed in which many hundreds of prisoners died. The winning leaders who were captured alive were separated from the remnants of the camp and were sent off to an unknown destination.

Our strike ~~xxx~~ broke out in support of the Kingin strike but also because we demanded a more humane treatment for the sick and invalids in ~~the~~ the camp as well as a cheaper price for food ~~an~~ stuffs in the canteen. We also demanded that theatrical groups and especially actresses should be allowed to play in the camp. None of these demands were fulfilled by the prison command, although it was amazing to see how much disturbing effect it had on the government officials. High thinking officers of the Army as well as government officials came down from Moscow. They pleaded with the inmates through loudspeakers. One day they would play music and say that everybody would start working next day. When the following day came they saw that ~~no~~ none went back to work, they would do the whole ceremony all over again, but in vain.

Finally, the secret police came in and called on everybody one by one to resume work immediately or else facing the secret police all alone. ^PPeople were afraid to say no and the strike was ~~written~~ broken. The ring leaders were rounded up and were sent away. What struck me in particular in connection with these two strikes ^{was} how well the Russian inmates knew what the camp commandant, the guard and the higher officials could or could not do. For quite some time, it seemed to me that they were leading them by their noses. All ^{the} little tricks of the prison administration and of the higher officials were counted by either or else the inmates had seen through the tricks of their superiors. Finally, they yielded only to ~~trudge~~ ~~forth~~ because when the political officers came in they were accompanied by ^{them} ~~two~~ and they were told that the same thing would happen in our camp as it did in Kingir if work was not resumed.

(9) Conditions in Siberia.

A few months after the strike some of us were taken to Siberia into another camp where we spent only a short time, after which in 1955 I was released. After my release I could walk around freely and soon started on the journey home with many other released prisoners.

I saw many places in Siberia. I was amazed to see how well populated it was, how many large cities it had and how many factories there were. This ~~xxxx~~ came as a complete surprise to me. ^Prior to this I always thought of Siberia as a vast uninhabited area. But this is no longer so, there is a lot of building and construction going on everywhere.

It took me a few months to get the needed transportation back to Hungary. Upon our arrival in Hungary we were received by the AVG. Some of us apparently were released by the Russians on the condition that ~~xxx~~ we would have to serve the rest of our prison terms in Hungary. Fortunately, by some miracle, I wasn't in this group and I was released.

Interviewer's Ratings.

Respondent has been very cooperative. ^A He is related to one of our project members, Mr. [REDACTED], and considered it a miracle that he ~~xxx~~ got out ~~alive~~ of a Russian life imprisonment ^{alive.}