

We Shall Live in Heaven

By

Pastor Harri Haamer

Tartu Academy of Theology

Translated by Tiina Kaia Ets

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All the profits from the sale of this book will go toward the education of clergy and pastoral care givers and counselors in Estonia, one of the world's most secular countries. If you would like to make an additional donation to support mission work in Estonia you are welcome to find options from www.tat.news.

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FOREWORD

My father, Harri Haamer (July 8, 1906–August 8, 1987), was born in the small town of Kuressaare on the green island Saaremaa which nestles up against Estonia, just out in the Baltic Sea. He was the middle son among three in the family, and he grew up in that peaceful place.

He did not know it, but before he was born, a book had been written whose influence would fling him across the vast continent of Eurasia and into a wretched exile. That book was Karl Marx's *The Communist Manifesto*, and its ideas still enslave whole populations, as it did millions during the Soviet time. Harri was only 11 when the Bolshevik Revolution seized power in Russia. He was 12 when his homeland, which had been a Russian colony for 200 years, took advantage of the upheaval and won independence.

At age 16 he became a Boy Scout and later was a Scout leader, beginning a life-long calling to care for youth. After graduation from the Gymnasium (high school) he entered studies with the Faculty of Theology at the University of Tartu, from which he graduated in 1929. He was ordained a Lutheran pastor and appointed to Püha (Holy) Congregation in Saaremaa. In the autumn of 1933, he was called to Paulus Church in Tartu.

He married Maimu Maramaa on May 10, 1934, and they were blessed with three children, Eenok, Maarja and Andres. However, turmoil surrounded their little home and parish, as first the Soviet Russians invaded Estonia, and then in 1941 the Nazis (Fascists). 1944 the Soviet Russians game back and stayed for almost 50 years.

A fire burnt down the Paulus Church in 1944. When the WWII was over 1945, my father started to restore this

church. The Soviet Occupation Authorities did not favor it, and neither did they like his pastoral activities with students. On February 5, 1948, Harri was arrested and deported to a convict-labor camp in far eastern Siberia. He was sentenced to eight years in concentration camps because he was accused of having educated Estonian youth in the wrong spirituality. Here his book begins.

Not content to strike at him alone, his family was also scheduled to be deported to Siberia on March 25, 1949. On that day, more than 20,000 Estonians were forced to leave their homes for Siberia. Most of them never returned, and we also might have gone and died there. Andres was six, Maarja ten, and I was 13 years old.

However, our mother got word of it and decided that we would leave home before the soldiers came. Andres had caught a high fever, and mother had to leave him with neighbors. My sister Maarja was taken to people we knew. So began a six-and-a-half year period of escaping and hiding ourselves constantly. Mother, a 17-year-old homeless boy named Albert whom we had adopted, and I became “anti-Communist partisans” in the dense forests of Southern Estonian. It was possible to hide ourselves there because faithful local people, who knew us, helped us and risked their freedom for us. For four of those six years we lived in an underground bunker dug adjacent to a farm cellar. The kindly couple who lived there fed us, cared for us, and even vented the bunker’s chimney through theirs.

God twice saved us from getting arrested. Once a raid was conducted on the farm where we were sheltered, and the soldiers almost caught us. However, they did not recognize us as the Haamer family, supposedly a mother with a young teenage boy, a little girl and a small boy. Next, when they came to capture us somewhere else, we were there but God

closed their eyes so that they did not see the door of our room.

I fell ill with bone tuberculosis, and there was no way to treat it. We could not go to the doctor, since we could not be seen in public. Danger was everywhere. God heard our prayers and the disease withdrew, so that I was able to grow up, do my work and take care of my family. This time became for me a university of suffering, which mirrored the anguish and darkness in my country. It was then, when I was fourteen, that God called me to become His servant.

I was 20 when my father returned from Siberia and gathered together his scattered family. It was due to the great mercy of God that we were all alive. We received the gift of life with father for 32 more years, and those were blessed years. Father was a profound believer, who trusted Jesus completely. His great influence is also reflected in our children. My three sons have studied theology, and they all have become workers for God's Kingdom. They are lutheran pastors of the third generation.

Father Harri has also had a great impact on the Estonian Lutheran Church. His mind was open ecumenically, and he tried to unite all those who loved God. He had many friends in different Christian churches. I also consider the Tartu Academy of Theology, which I founded, to be my father's heritage.

He was an excellent story teller and a skilled writer. His literary heritage is large, and a special place is dedicated to the spiritual literature he wrote for children. Out of his approximately 2,000 preserved sermons, there are two published collections. Through his blessed heritage he is still talking to the people of his beloved Estonia.

Eenok Haamer, *Son of Harri Haamer*
President of Tartu Academy of Theology

INTRODUCTION

Harri Haamer, the pastor of St. Paul's congregation in Tartu, was arrested in the winter of 1948. He was taken to the main prison in Tallinn, as preparation for a long trip to the Kolyma Gulag in far-eastern Siberia. In the summer of 1948, he was sentenced and deported to an eight-year term in a labor camp and an additional three-year term of "limited freedom". The prisoner's sentence was shortened by two years for his diligent work but upon leaving the Gulag, Haamer was told that he faced "lifelong exile". This was eventually reversed in 1955 when he was notified that he had been "arrested in error". Such was Haamer's account in his 1974 New Year's sermon (published in a collection of sermons by Estonians *Tie, totuus, elämä* (The way, the truth, the life) Kirjaneliö 1990). Stalin had died in 1953, ushering in a period of thaw; a chapter in USSR's and occupied Estonia's history had ended.

Harri Haamer was permitted to continue his ministry upon his return from Siberia. However, the convicted pastor was not permitted to resume at his former congregation but was instead sent to Tarvastu in eastern Estonia. He ministered there from 1955 until his death in 1987. He passed away on August 8th, 1987 at the age of 81.

Haamer's ministry was exceptionally long considering that he had been installed as pastor nearly two years ahead of the established age limit of 25. Due to Estonia's severe shortage of pastors, he was permitted to minister until his 80's, despite the retirement cutoff of 70. He served the church for 58 years.

Harri Haamer was born July 8, 1906 in Kuressaare, Saaremaa. Like his brother Eerik Haamer, a noteworthy

painter, Harri was artistically gifted; multi-talented in sports, he was also a promising decathlete. But Haamer's true passion was for youth work and becoming a Scout and youth leader. After high school, he began studying for the ministry.

At 22, Harri Haamer completed his theological studies at Tartu University and was appointed into the newly established position as Secretary of Youth Ministries. This appointment lasted only six months until the autumn of 1929 when he was encouraged to apply as pastor to Saaremaa's Püha-congregation, which had languished long without a minister. Haamer was installed as pastor in October of 1929. In 1933, he transferred from Püha to St. Paul's congregation in Tartu. He served at St. Paul's for fifteen years which included the German occupation and war years. As the Germans withdrew in August of 1944, amid fierce battles over Tartu, a fire destroyed St. Paul's church, congregational house and Haamer's home.

Harri Haamer was renowned as a great storyteller and a friend of children. He published three short, self-illustrated books of children's stories in 1937-38. His most expansive publication was a 144-page devotional titled *Tema käsi* (His Hand, 1934). Another devotional intended for young people called *Sinule* (For You) appeared in 1939, followed by a short novel *Ester* (Esther) during the German occupation in 1943. The ensuing Soviet occupation ended a promising publishing venture though Haamer did not stop writing, as this collection of remembrances attests. The 1991 Estonian hymnal contains over twenty hymns either written or translated by Harri Haamer. During his time in Tarvastu, he continued his studies and attained a master's degree in theology in 1962. He was an Old Testament and Hebrew lecturer at Tallinn's theological institute.

Estonia's short-lived 20-year independence ended in the summer of 1940. The Soviet armies invaded Estonia in June and by August, USSR had annexed Estonia, the ramifications of the Molotov-Ribbentrop agreement, a non-aggression pact between USSR and Hitler's Germany (August 8, 1939) which included a secret codicil assigning the Baltics and Finland to the Soviets, which ignited Finland's Winter War.

House searches, arrests and deportations to Siberia began immediately upon Soviet occupation. Approximately 7,000 were imprisoned in 1940. June 14th, 1941 marked the mass-deportation of over 10,000 Estonians who were forcibly removed from their homesteads – men were sent into labor-camps, the women & children to Siberia. Germany declared war on the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941 and invaded the Baltics. German occupation continued until 1944, when around 70,000 Estonians fled to the West in fear of the returning Soviets. Thousands of men – including Estonian soldiers wishing to avoid being drafted into the German army – hid themselves in the forests in order to prepare for resistance. These “forest brothers” maintained their guerilla tactics until the mid-50's, and the remaining forest brothers did not emerge until the 70's.

The imprisonment and deportation of those deemed as enemies of the State resumed in the old fashion, “in all silence but in greater numbers” (Mart Laar). It is estimated that about 10,000 were arrested and killed annually until the end of March, 1949, which marked a sweeping mass-deportation. This was designed to intimidate the citizens into joining collectives which had been forcibly imposed on all farms and homesteads. According to official reports, well over 20,000 Estonians were banished on March 25th, 1949. The actual number was easily double that, and according to some reports,

even greater. The Haamer family avoided this fate by hiding from the authorities for long periods of time.

Nothing comparable to this happened again after Stalin's death. But an atmosphere of crippling fear and mistrust enveloped all and did not dissipate until the late 1980's when freedom's winds began to blow. The autocratic communist party feared potential opponents who in turn feared their rulers. One could never be certain who might turn out to be an informant; apprehension and helplessness prevailed. Democratic freedoms were severely limited and human rights were routinely violated. The State consistently spread suspicion which worked like a poison among the people. Society had become sick.

Harri Haamer was by no means the only Estonian Lutheran pastor to suffer deportation and forced labor. Between 1940 and '41, 17 fulltime pastors were deported to Siberia of whom only a couple eventually returned. Likewise, practically the same number of pastors shared this fate between 1944 and '54, but nearly all of them returned home and resumed their ministries, some as early as 1955, several in 1956. The church's activities were strictly controlled: worship and religious services within the church building, as well as, funerals were permitted. All other activities were forbidden: youth- and children's ministries, religious education, diaconate services, publishing, and all contact with sister-churches abroad. Within a decade, the church had lost two-thirds of its pastors either due to flight, banishment, deportations, or executions. Of the roughly 220 pastors serving in 1939, only about 70 remained by 1949, leaving half the existing congregations without a pastor.

In February 1988, the Estonian Heritage Preservation Association (Eesti Muinsuskaitse Selts) launched a massive collection of the Estonians' written memories and recorded

accounts; a project intended to save and preserve a precious history from destruction. The widely-publicized project was a tremendous success, yielding an abundance of material. Recollections and documents of the 1941 deportation were published in Finnish, in 1989, under the title *Kesäkuun 14. Päivä* (Fourteenth of June). Harri Haamer's personal recollections have also been preserved in this collection.

Though Haamer's diaries do not add anything substantively new to the already published works about life and conditions in Soviet prison-camps, their significance lies in something else. While taking the reader through Estonia's bitter tribulations and painful memories, his accounts testify of the sustaining power of a Christian's faith and hope. As Harri Haamer would affirm – while imitating the arrogant intonations of the prison guards – “Hopelessness has no place in *Our* program.”

Translated by Maarit Vaga from Tauno Väinola's Introduction to the Finnish edition 1990.

THE JOURNEY BEGINS

I am arrested. They don't talk with me very long in the "gray house" of Tartu. The same pock-marked *chekist*¹ who had been waving his Nagant revolver around on the street sends me down to the cellar. There, two guards with *Komsomol*² insignia order me to disrobe. "Why must I do that?" I ask.

"Are you in jail for the first time?" asks one young man.

"For the first time!" I reply.

"How old are you?" asks the same boy.

"Nearly forty-two."

He turns to the other one and says: "This guy has lived on this earth for forty two years, and he's in jail for the first time!"

At the time, I do not understand why they should be so surprised.

What else can I do but strip myself naked? They take my belt. They cut off my pants buttons. They pull out my shoelaces. They empty my pockets. They take my Testament. They take my money. They like my pocket knife. One of them says that they won't be recording this one. He slides my pocket knife into his own pocket as I look on.

When they order me to get dressed once again, I have to hold my pants up with one hand, because I have nothing to fasten them with. Then they shove me into a cell.

There I stand. Not even a stool to sit on. I could sit on the floor, if I pull my knees up tight to my chin. I have never

¹ *chekist* – Communist secret police agent (KGB)

² *Komsomol* – Young Communist League; membership was required of all young people

been in such a miserable chamber. A 15-watt bulb burns in the ceiling. The space is too small to take even a single step.

Why have they thrown me in here? I see there have been others here before me. They have used something to scrape their names into the plaster. But another hand has erased them.

One name remains: Laine Aller. She has suffered in this cell before me. Perhaps she was taken away yesterday, perhaps today, right before I got here. Is she a young girl, or perhaps a mother? I wonder what she did to make them arrest her. I have never heard the name before, but I will remember it for a long time. It means that she stood here, just like I am standing, with just enough presence of mind to scrape her name into the wall. I wonder what she scraped with. They take away all your sharp objects. Perhaps they left her one button, perhaps the clasp of her bra. Or maybe she scraped it with her fingernail? I ponder my own situation. Why have they arrested me? I was shown no arrest warrant. They entrapped me. That woman called herself Olenina. The city's Executive Committee Secretary was Olenina. But was she also an officer for state security? Have Beria's police finally recruited all the officials into their service? Is the Executive Committee a branch of the state security apparatus? They had wanted to honor me by granting me the job of informer. Perhaps my refusal to accept this "honor" is the reason for my arrest. I don't know; I really don't know anything. They just want to dispose of me quietly. A few weeks ago, the Deputy for Religious Affairs ordered me to stop conducting my youth classes, which were attended by many university students. I told him: "I won't stop. It is more important to obey the word of God than the word of man." He became angry and said: "Well, then we must find another way to discipline you." And now this is undoubtedly "another way to discipline me."

You see, the Deputy is also an agent for the state security apparatus. We are surrounded by Beria's police. What I did or did not do makes no difference; eventually, they would have found me.

My wife Maimu came along, as if trying to protect me. No sooner had we stepped out of our house than a Jewish boy began to follow us. He elbowed his way over to me and inquired, rolling his r's: "Are you Pastor Haamer?" I replied, "No, I'm not." But he shadowed me all the way to the "gray house." There I was met by an entire pack of men carrying pistols. I did not need to introduce myself to them. They quickly took me up the stairs, not letting us utter another word to each other.

Did they release Maimu? My son Eenok has a fever. I wanted to call the doctor. And now I am standing in this cell. I was in such a hurry to get here that I did not even take the time to pray with my children. Eenok called to me from his bed, but I simply glanced at him without realizing I should say good-bye. Maarja and Albert were in school, and Ats sat on the floor, playing with his blocks.

But all those who have despaired here before me had been torn away from someone. Whom did Laine leave behind? A father, a mother, a sister, a brother, a husband, her children? How could I ever find out? I had better pray for the loved ones she left behind. I pray for my children. I pray for Laine Aller's children, although I do not even know if she has any. Perhaps they apprehended her as she was taking food into the forest for her father or brother. Now she is being prosecuted as a "bandit collaborator." Bandits. How will my crime be classified?

I ponder my fate as well as Laine Aller's for a long time. I feel that if I ever meet her, I will greet her as a sister.

Suddenly, the door opens and a somber-faced guard wordlessly hands me a bowl of gray soup. Its odor envelops the cell. Just as wordlessly, I push it back to him.

Nobody comes around to bother me any more.

The corridor gradually becomes silent. Perhaps it is already nighttime. But there is no way I can lie down.

I do not need to. Two uniformed men open the cell and order me to follow them. One officer walks ahead, the other behind, and the man with the machine gun carries my leather

suitcase, which probably represents the fruits of their search. They have handcuffed me, just in case. But it is hard for me to move along, because my pants sag around my hips and my unlaced shoes want to flop off my feet.

The streets are empty. I am taken to the station. One of the drivers at the station recognizes me. I whisper to him to tell my wife that I am being taken away. But the *chekists* are already sending the man away.

For the first time in my life, I am traveling at the government's expense and under heavy guard. They have apprehended a dangerous national criminal. The *chekists* are diligently fulfilling their plan.

I AM TAKEN TO “INDIA”

If I take stock of everything I have learned of geography, I have some idea of what India is like. But I had no conception of the “India” that awaited me behind the door of Cell 17 of Patarei Prison. Only tales of fear and terror passed from cell to cell about this “India.” For the most part, they did not concern political prisoners, because none of them were eligible for placement into this cell, which held a collection of the most loathsome cutthroats from the entire prison. Occasionally, the prison’s fire brigade would be called in to subdue them with a stream of water sprayed in through the *kormushka*³ (“fodder bin,” an opening in the cell door through which food is passed). Whenever muted screams from somewhere at the end of the corridor echoed into our cell, I was certain they emanated from “India.”

And then one night, not in a dream, but in reality, I stand at the door of Cell 17 and wait to be shoved inside.

How did this happen?

I spent a month in the Patarei Prison hospital. I had fallen victim to scurvy while being held in the cellar of the Pagari Street building. The Hebrew doctor treated me very humanely, and would not let them release me from the hospital until the abscesses on my legs had healed and my teeth no longer rattled loose in my gums.

Once out of the hospital, I am back with my people. Before long, we forge close friendships. I immediately begin leading evening prayers in the cell. I teach the men a beautiful song that has comforted me a great deal. It begins with the words “The light shall soon defeat the darkness, a time of joy shall follow our tears,” and it ends with the comforting words “The beggar shall be wealthy, the prisoner shall be freed...”

³ *kormushka* – “Fodder bin” the hole through which prisoners were fed.

Soon, the men are singing it with great enthusiasm. It is barely a week since I have begun providing spiritual comfort to my cellmates when an official wearing golden epaulettes bursts into the cell with his entourage and shouts, “Who’s singing in here?”

I know that no one dares to tell him we are doing something as a group, because we would be in deep trouble; Soviet authorities fear organized resistance above all else. And so, before anyone else gets a chance to open his mouth, I calmly step forth and reply, “I am singing.” “Why are you singing?” the officer asks angrily.

“I am a Christian and I am in prison. I must sing to keep sadness at bay. Christ’s apostles Paul and Silas also sang in prison, so that they would not despair.”

“All right, all right!” says the golden epaulette. He turns on his heel and disappears along with his entire entourage. A *korpusnoi*⁴ (unit commander) shows up later to take my name. The next morning, I am summoned *s vestsami*⁵ (“with all my things”). I am shoved into Cell 13. Some of the men there know me. Some of the others know me by way of the prison “telegraph system,” which serves to transmit all the prison’s news.

That very first night in my new cell, I begin fulfilling my obligations as a man of the cloth. I recite Bible passages from memory and explain them. I console and reassure my fellow sufferers with my sermons. Our prayer sessions are solemn and moving. Naturally, I teach them the same song.

But I fare no better in this cell. I am left in peace for about a week. Then one morning, the same gold-epauletted⁶

⁴ *Korpusnoi* – Prison unit commander

⁵ *s vestsami* – “With your things;” an order for a prisoner to move out

⁶ *gold-epaulette* – Shoulder fringes on Communist Youth uniforms; this signified a higher rank

official bursts into the cell. Now I realize that he is the prison's chief commander.

"Who's singing in here?" he shouts even more fiercely than before.

Once again, I step up to him and reply, "I am singing."

"You again!" the officer scolds.

"Yes, I am a Christian and I am in prison. I must sing to keep sadness at bay. Paul and Silas were in prison..."

"All right, all right, I've already heard your sermon." The lord and master gives up in disgust.

My name is not written up this time. But the next morning, I hear the same order once more: "Come along, with all your things!"

For the third time in as many weeks, I find myself in a new cell. And I start all over again.

I feel as if "The light shall soon defeat the darkness" is becoming the anthem of the congregation that I am acquiring and serving, cell by cell. However, in this new cell I can preach the Gospel in peace for only three days. On the morning of the fourth day, I hear a suspicious fumbling at the cell door. The door unlocks with a creak. The official with the gold epaulettes enters once more, accompanied by a *korpusnoi*.

"There's singing in this cell every day!" he declares with official sternness. Silence.

"Who's singing?" the accompanying officer shouts, raising his voice.

"I am singing." I reply with studied cheer.

"Oh, you're singing? Why are you singing?"

"I am a Christian and I am in prison. The apostles Paul and Silas also sang in prison, to keep from falling into despair. And that is the reason I am singing too."

This man has not heard my story yet, and lets me finish what I have to say. He turns on his heel and leaves. Nobody takes down my name. My cellmates, who recognize him as the prison's program chief, tell me that he is a kindly man. The next morning, nobody comes in to bother me, and I dare to hope that he will let me continue my spiritual

activities at my discretion. This cell has not finished learning the song. We spend the last evening learning it with special diligence.

That evening, the command of *otboi*⁷ (“Down for the night!”) is issued through the *kormushk*⁸ as usual. I lie down on my bunk like a dutiful prisoner.

But that night, when I least expect it, I am awakened from a deep sleep: “Haamer, Harri Aleksandrovich, date of birth 1906.”

“Yes,” I reply through a curtain of sleep.

“Come along, with all your things!”

Yes, of course, they must be transferring me to yet another cell. But why in the middle of the night?

The *korpusnoi* leads the way and I follow. A fine man, I think; he trusts me not to push him.

The guard of the next corridor opens the iron bars of the gate and locks them behind us once again. We go through another set of gates, and we are there.

“Wait here,” orders the *korpusnoi*, and disappears.

I wait. Suddenly, my eyes find the cell door where they have left me standing. The number on it is 17. My heart sinks. Are they really going to throw me into “India?” My fearful imagination has not yet been able to take full flight when the *korpusnoi* returns, opens the door to Cell 17, and seals my destiny with a single phrase - “Get in!” The lock creaks behind me, and my body and soul are left to the mercy of criminals that strike fear into the entire prison population.

A lamp burns in the ceiling. The men sleep on bunks, lying on their backs with their faces uncovered, according to prison rules. I can meet them all right there. In sleep, their faces are not so frightening. But one of them has propped himself up on his bunk and is questioning me in Russian:

⁷ *otboi* – “Down for the night!”: an order that all the men must be on the bunks

⁸ *kormushka* – “Fodder bin” the hole through which prisoners were fed.

“Who are you?” “I am a human being,” I tell him anxiously, to which he replies: “A genuine human being, with dick and all. I can see that. How many people have you wasted to be thrown in here?”

“Not one.” I say in my defense, startled.

“You a smasher?” he inquires.

I do not know that vernacular for “burglar.” However, I have a pretty good idea that it does not describe my field of activity and I reply “No.”

“Then you’re just a simple thief?”

It is terribly unfortunate that I have to answer this patient young man’s last question in the negative as well. Hearing that, his neighbor, who has awakened, remarks, “He ain’t one of us,” and falls asleep once more.

I ask this sensible thief where I might lie down. He indicates a spot on the floor near the *parask*⁹ (metal latrine bucket).

I spread out the blanket I have brought along from home, cover myself with my coat and try to sleep, leaving myself in God’s grace.

After we are awakened, allowed to use the toilet and wash, the real interrogation begins. It is conducted by an old thief with a hardened face and a look in his eyes that was so frightening that it could convince anyone that this man might choke him to death.

However, when he hears that I am a pastor, he respectfully leaves me in peace. Nobody cares when one of the young punks insults me by saying “You - with the long hair and short wit” Nobody pays any attention to me. They have their own stories, their own plans, their own jokes. And I do not try to contribute to their conversations. Only God knows how long I can keep quietly to myself among them. I am dispirited, and my outlook less than rosy.

But then something happens.

⁹ *parask* – Latrine bucket; usually a barrel crudely cut in half

Around midday, before we hear the racket of the meal-bucket being brought to our door, the *kormushk* is opened and my name is called. I am to come out and receive a package. I get up and go to the opening. I am already being shadowed by two “Indians.” No sooner do I give my signature than they grab the parcel and dump its entire contents into a box. Of course, they plan to distribute the goods. Fifty percent of everything belongs to them.

I catch a glimpse of the sorry contents of the package; it has been hacked into small pieces. Ham and boiled potatoes, radishes and cookies, all reduced to a hideous mush. Apparently, this is how the prison administration is trying to keep me in line. I have little desire to stuff myself with this slop. Still, I make a stern face and tell the boys, “Get your hands off! This package is mine and I can do whatever I want with it.”

The roomful of pickpockets is suddenly attentive. They had not expected a man of the cloth to act this way. Before they can intervene, I place the box containing the remnants of my package onto the table and declare, “This, my brothers, is all for you. In God’s name, you may eat it.” The men rise from their places. One that has risen to get his share argues, “No, only fifty percent of it is ours.”

“No, not fifty percent. I want to give it all to you and I will do so. The prison swill is enough for me.”

“Well, *batyushka*¹⁰, if that’s how you feel, you can at least come and share with us,” declares the old recidivist, who seems to be the chief in here, in a friendly tone.

I sit at the table with the thieves, bless myself and my handful of food with the sign of the cross, and eat.

That is how I formed a bond of brotherhood with those fellows, the ones that the prison administration had deemed to be the most suitable companions for me.

¹⁰ *Batyushka* – Father, bishop, Patriarch; common usage for Orthodox clergy

The most memorable days of my life in prison began right here.

They wanted me to sit with them and tell them a story. I talked and talked. I told them of sin, and the awakening of conscience, and the grace of God, and redemption through the sacrificial blood of Jesus Christ. They listened. The entire cell listened from morning until night. The cell's "cow"¹¹ listened too. The "cow" was occasionally taken out to be "milked," after which he returned and sat with us again. And so I lived in "India" for nearly a month, until my trial. Nobody fought me for any of the other packages I received. Arkadi, the young Russian in the military shirt who slept in the next bunk, said to me: "Father, if we end up in the same camp, and somebody there insults you, I'll stab him to death." I did not doubt that he would do so, because he had plenty of experience, having killed three people already.

When I was taken to trial, they all shook my hand in farewell. The Chief kissed me three times. And I blessed him.

¹¹ "cow" to be "milked" – A prisoner placed into each cell as a snitch; the authorities would periodically remove him from the cell so that he could tell them about what was being said and done there

TELL US ABOUT YOUR CRIMES

I was only interrogated at night, as if the process fears the light of day. Those poor interrogators. I was depriving them of their night's rest.

My first interrogator is named Major Zaitsev. Of course, it is possible that each of these security men have several different names.

He is a very polite middle-aged officer who takes his job very seriously.

The guard takes me from Cell 13 of the Pagari Street building through several corridors and up some narrow stairways to a large room, where he hands me over to a man with golden epaulettes who introduces himself as Major Zaitsev. There is no need for me to introduce myself, since my file lays on the table in front of him.

Still, he has to record all the formalities into my interrogation record. I must answer his questions about my surname, given name, patronymic¹² and date of birth.

After he has recorded the answers to those questions, he turns to me and begins amicably, "All right, now please tell me about your crimes."

"Crimes?" I ask, astonished.

"Indeed, please tell me truthfully: why have you been arrested and why are the Soviet authorities forced to punish you?"

"Excuse me, but I have no idea why I've been arrested or what crimes I have committed, to force the Soviet authorities to punish me," I insist stubbornly.

"Think about it carefully," the polite *chekist* says. He lights a cigarette and leaves the room.

¹² *patronymic* – Middle name; shows father's name; "Mikailovich," son of Mikail

He lets me sit alone and wait for quite some time. When he returns, I am dozing. And since I am unable to come up with a satisfactory response, he sends me back down to the cellar. Undoubtedly, he has failed to fulfill his plan for that night. But perhaps he has had more success with his interrogations of other “criminals.”

I sit in the basement cell for a week or more and ponder whatever crimes I may have committed. I can think of a few deeds that are deserving of God’s wrath, but nothing that would require me to appear before a Soviet court. I have not fought in any army, nor taken part in any conspiracy. I have never slandered Soviet authorities nor praised the shameful actions of the Fascists. Instead, I have saved communists from death camps, sheltered members of underground movements, published an underground religious youth magazine during the German occupation, given sermons opposing the persecution of Jews. Truly, I do not have the slightest inkling why the Soviet courts would want to punish me.

The more I puzzle over it, the more incomprehensible the motives for my arrest become. Finally, I escape the mental nightmare by puzzling no longer. My attention is consumed by the physical living conditions in this basement, which are unbearable. The men sit on the floor, naked. The sweat pours down our sides incessantly. The ventilation system is perpetually out of order. We have developed a system of taking turns: each man is given some time to breathe fresh air coming from a crack, a few centimeters wide, between the door and the floor. This “fresh air” carries the scent of the musty corridor, but compared to the stuffy dampness of our cell, it is still fresh air. In the dank air of our cell, the chunk of bread we get each morning is moldy by the evening.

When my wife brings me a package, we have to eat its contents immediately. We cannot save a single mouthful for the next day. Of course, the thirteen of us in that cell can devour the food in no time at all.

We are allowed to speak only in whispers. If anyone dares to raise his voice, the guard will hiss through the hatch: “Quiet!”

And still, I can preach the Gospel to my cellmates, even if I must whisper. In whispers, we share our life stories. In whispers, we discuss our outlook for the future. In whispers, we even argue.

Our only change of scenery is the daily fifteen-minute walk in the prison’s narrow yard, where we must follow each other in single file, our hands behind our back. No one is allowed to say a word or to look up. But no one says we cannot to fill our lungs with the cool, fresh winter air.

But after this respite in the fresh air, it is even harder to return to the stale, hot and humid cell.

When I have finished telling my stories, I sit there staring at the crushed remnants of a louse, trying to ascertain how much it has dried since yesterday.

I start to think they have forgotten all about me when they come one night and take me to another interrogation.

Major Zaitsev has apparently kept the previous interrogation record, and can skip the questions about my first and last name, patronymic and date of birth. He gets right down to business.

“So, have you given some thought to your criminal activity?”

“Yes, I’m so terribly sorry I was so unfair to my son. He was sick in bed when I was taken away, and I thought he was being lazy. I have been stern with him all too often, and impatient when I thought he was not studying diligently enough. That is the greatest crime that has come to mind. I truly wish I could make amends.”

The investigator calmly lets me finish my statement. Then he fixes me with a harsh stare and silently summons the guard. The interrogation is over.

“That was quick!” grunts the guard as he shoves me into the cell.

That night, sleep does not come. I wonder what they will do to me now?

But each day passes like the one before. Twice a day, we are fed. Twice a day, we are counted. We are also taken to the bathhouse with bullet holes in the walls. The men know that people were killed here in 1941. One of the chief executioners, a *korpusnoi*, earned the rank of second lieutenant. For some reason, that stocky officer with the pockmarked face was nicknamed King Kong. Without a doubt, anyone meeting a face like his in the dark would stop in his tracks. During the head counts, he does not behave like a brute, although his eyes betray what he might be capable of.

Two weeks pass and I am not called. Perhaps they have forgotten me. I receive no more packages. Perhaps the investigator is punishing me for not “honestly” confessing my crimes. The men in my cell think that I will be sent home soon. My heart becomes heavier, the longer I am left in peace. Still, I pick my brain, trying to recall anything that the Soviet authorities could punish me for, anything at all. If they interrogate me again, I will not deny it.

Scurvy begins to gnaw at my body. My feet swell, and festering sores appear on them. Some days I am so exhausted that I hardly feel like going out for my walk. Still, I force myself to eat and dress for the walk.

Suddenly, I am summoned in the middle of the day. “That’s a good sign,” my cellmates assure me.

The same interrogation room, this time with two officers. My old “friend” has enlisted the help of a heavysset captain. It seems that I am a tough nut to crack.

Now the captain is questioning me. They both have sheets of paper for taking notes. When I have introduced myself with my first and last name and patronymic, the captain asks, “Tell me, why did you stay here in Estonia?”

“To serve my people,” I reply.

“Hah! To serve your people. You didn’t stay here to serve your people, but to betray them. And now the people will judge you!” he snarls angrily.

“What do you mean, judge me? I haven’t met a single member of my nationality here. I am forced to speak Russian with you, and even the guard standing outside is a foreigner. Please tell me, where are my people, the ones who are to judge me?” I ask, protesting.

“Fine. You want to meet a member of your nationality here. We have a few.” Having said that, the fierce captain gets up and leaves the room. The major is silent, doodling on his paper. A short time later, the captain returns with a hunchbacked Jew. Without introducing himself, the newcomer asks, with a marked roll to his r’s: “What is your name?” “Haamer,” I reply. “Haamer, yes, Haamer, and what is your profession?” asks my “compatriot.”

“I am a pastor.”

“Pastor, yes, a pastor. How long have you worked as a pastor?” asks the Hebrew.

“Twenty years.”

“Twenty years. That’s a long time. They’ve let you wear your black coat for too long. It’s about time we stripped it off your back!” snarls the Jew on behalf of my people, and leaves.

I turn to the officer, who has understood not one word of our exchange, and say, “Thank you for proving your claim. The proof was more than satisfactory.”

“Now, you see,” says the major calmly, “you can tell me about your crimes.”

“Yes, now I can tell you what you’re interested in hearing,” I say meaningfully.

Both interrogators prepare to take notes.

“I am a thief,” I say to their astonishment. They stare at me for a moment, eyes wide with surprise. Then the captain says, “You’re a thief. Are you stealing bread from your comrades in the cell?”

“No, not that. But I steal something every day by glancing up at the blue heaven above.”

“What do you mean?” asks the major curiously.

“Every day, when we are taken for our walk, I steal a glance at the blue heaven above.”

“Why do you steal that?” the captain inquires.

“Because it is forbidden.”

“Who forbids it?” the captain barks in sudden aggravation, coming over to stand directly in front of me.

“The sadists you have assigned to guard us,” I reply calmly.

He strikes me on the head. Sparks dance before my eyes. Protecting my face with my hands, I wait for the next blow, but it never comes. The captain returns to his seat, hissing with rage. I tell him, with all the bitterness of a degraded prisoner: “And even if you poke out my eyes, you can never keep me from looking to the heavens.”

They exchange a few quiet words. The captain leaves the room, never giving me another glance, and does not return. I never see him again in my life.

The major discovers a file and finds something in it to read. After looking it over, he starts asking me about people who have tried to escape across the border. Do I know any such people? Yes, I remember that incident with the provocateur.

I tell him how a small man secretly entered my chancellery one day and asked to speak to me privately. He introduced himself as Adossor. The major begins to write diligently. I describe the event in vivid detail, telling him how the man said he had heard I was a kindly person who was helping people escape across the bay to Finland. I asked the provocateur where he had heard about this. “At the women’s clinic,” replied the dimwit. I escorted that man to the door, suggesting that he go and dig up some more foolish gossip, because the clinic was a place where lots of women congregated and gossip was rampant.

“But why didn’t you report this man to the authorities?” asks the interrogator with feigned sternness.

“I didn’t have to, because you were the ones who sent him in the first place.” He does not mention the incident any more.

“But haven’t you attempted to conceal any criminals from the Soviet authorities?” asks the major, changing the subject.

“How could I have concealed any criminals?”

“Well, by issuing them some false documents and helping them get passports.”

“As far as false documents, it’s possible that I’ve issued thousands. All our congregation’s records were destroyed when our church burned down on August 25, 1944. When I tried to reconstruct the records, people would come to help me out, giving me the information verbally. Whenever anyone needed a document issued on the basis of church records, I did so without further inquiry. I did realize that Soviet law regards any document issued by a pastor on the basis of congregation records to be just a piece of paper, and not an official document. If you want to prosecute anyone for illegal activity, you’ll have to arrest the police authorities who issued passports on the basis of those church documents. It is not my responsibility to check the identities of each person that gave me his or her name, especially since our congregation registers contained nearly 20,000 names at the time.” My explanation seems to satisfy him.

He has nothing more to ask me, neither does he require my signature on the interrogation records.

Apparently, my case is a confusing one.

Even now, it seems that the investigators are still lacking the justification they need to hand me over to the “harsh but fair” Soviet justice system. Soon thereafter, I am returned to the cell.

I have wasted enough of his time, and his plan is still unfulfilled.

In my heart, I know that my case is not over yet. Otherwise, the Deputy for Religious Affairs would not have

said, “We’ll have to discipline you in some other way.” This deputy had also been a member of the security apparatus.

I am sure they will find something for which to sentence me to a dozen years or so.

(This story is from the basement of the KGB¹³ building on Pagari Street, February 1948.)

¹³ *KGB* – Soviet secret police; spies and enforcers of the Communist state

HOPELESSNESS HAS NO PLACE IN OUR PROGRAM

Every ten days they take us to the bathhouse, which is located in the basement of Patarei Prison. We get there by passing through drafty, dismal passages. Word has it that people had been killed there. They were killed by the Russians, and then the Germans, and then again by the Russians.

It is ultimately irrelevant whether these people were killed there or somewhere else. But there is lots of writing on the walls and benches of the bath. Names, dates, sentences. It is like a mailbox through which friends and perfect strangers inform each other of their fate. So many names are followed by a date and the note: "sentenced to death." On the lid of a nightstand in Cell 8 of the quarantine wing, I found the last words of the first person sentenced to death. His name was Voldemar Tammaru, sentenced to death on December 24, 1945. He was shoved into that cell on Christmas Eve to await execution by shooting. Perhaps on that same Christmas Eve night, an executioner in red epaulettes put a bullet into the back of his head in that bathhouse corridor. I can never make the walk down that horrible passage to the baths with a peaceful heart. And yet, the bath is nothing but a ceiling with showerheads. The ones that happen to be working dribble enough warm water onto you to let you rinse off all the soap. Of course, there is also an oven for roasting clothing, called "hell for lice," and a barber. The only shaving apparatus that the barber knows how to use are hair clippers. This means that we, the prisoners, are never smoothly shaven. However, anybody who wants to have his chin scraped shiny smooth can have it done in the cell, using a shard of glass. Some fellows are adept at finding and concealing shards of glass, experts who can give you a smoother shave with a piece of glass than with the finest Swedish blade. But I never feel the urge to have

it done. Why irritate your skin by scraping at it over and over again?

The prisoners from the hospital wing bathe according to the same procedures as the prisoners from the general cells, with one exception. The residents of any two cells from the hospital wing are allowed to bathe together.

One day, Cells 4 and 5 of the hospital wing happen to be washing together in the bathhouse. I see a horribly thin stranger sitting on the bench, his face so sad that I cannot help but feel sorry for him. No one talks to him. His eyes are fixed in a glassy stare on the filthy bathhouse floor, and neither hand picks up the soap to lather his body. The man looks so typically German that I begin speaking to him in German.

It turns out that he is indeed a German soldier, imprisoned for the second time. He had been caught stealing salt from a warehouse where he had been working, carrying sacks of salt. He had stuffed a few handfuls of salt into his pocket. Now, he was awaiting the “harsh but fair” sentence of a Soviet court for committing this crime.

As he tells me his story, he becomes even more dejected. Somehow, I want to console this man from a foreign land. I ask if he is a Christian. He replies “yes.”

“But as Christians, we must know that hopelessness has no place in our program,” I tell him.

“How can that be?” the German protests. “Our outlook is so hopeless. Death will be my only escape!” the miserable man cries.

“Do you know the story of Jesus and his disciple on the stormy Lake Genetsareth?” I ask him.

“Of course I do,” he replies.

“Then you know what he said to his fearful friends when they cried: ‘Teacher, rise! We are doomed!’”

“He asked them: ‘Where is your faith?’”

“Yes, he asked them that,” I affirm. “And do you know why he asked them that?”

The German becomes thoughtful.

“He had a reason for asking them that question. In their fear of death, they had lost their faith in their teacher. They saw nothing else but the storm, and they were frightened by the waves crashing over the boat. But they did not know Jesus well enough to have enough faith to follow Him, even into death. To go with Him into death is not the same as to perish. If they had drowned in the lake along with Jesus, they would not have perished.

There is no situation into which we cannot go with Christ. If we have faith in Him, we will not perish, even if we should die. And that is why hopelessness has no place in our program.”

The German listens to me attentively.

“Do you understand?” I ask.

“I understand very well. I have never appreciated my Christian faith from that perspective. But it would truly be wonderful if I could feel that way. Then, there would be no more hopelessness in our lives. Not in any situation. No, that would be unspeakably wonderful.”

And the sad man’s eyes show a trace of a glimmer.

“You have comforted me so well. What may I do for you in return?” the thin man asks, brightening.

“You may wash my back,” I reply. And he starts scrubbing my back so energetically that I soon have to stop him, fearing that he will rub it raw. Of course, I scrub his back as well.

And so we form a union whose slogan is: “Hopelessness has no place in our program!”

A few days later, I get the Russian thief, that young girl who cleans the hospital rooms, to take him a small gift. He sends a reply written with a pencil stub on the margin of a scrap of paper torn from a newspaper. In addition to brief thanks, the missive contains the underlined words: “*In unserem Programm gibts keine Hoffnungslosigkeit.*”

(This recollection is from Patarei Hospital, April 1948.)

MY NAME IS DEARLY BELOVED

That limping three-striper¹⁴ known for his excessive zeal was nicknamed “The Skier.” He was one of the most vile guards ever to sit in the “dovecote” of the guard turret and watch over prisoners as we spent the twenty minutes of our exercise period walking in the yard by Patarei Prison.

Because the political prisoners would stubbornly try to communicate with each other in the yards during the exercise period, they no longer allowed the denizens of political prisoners’ cells to exercise in neighboring yards at the same time.

But I am a resident of “India,” and Cell 11, which is populated by political prisoners, is allowed to exercise in the yard next to ours.

Lyonka is the son of a colonel. However, thanks to all the robberies and murders he has committed, he is probably more famous than his military father. He wastes no time in hooking up with others of his ilk from the political prisoners’ cells. Soon, he is communicating with a “comrade” in the next yard through a chink in the wall. I am reasonably sure that my colleague Dean Lääne, a pastor from Märjamaa, is being held in that cell. I ask Lyonka to get Lääne to the chink in the wall. But The Skier has snapped to attention. He shouts at Lyonka, who ignores him. Before I can count to three, Lyonka whispers to me, “Lääne is at the fence,” and immediately turns to curse at The Skier in the foulest language. That is my signal to start talking with my colleague.

“Hello, brother. Best greetings on this cherished Sunday. May the grace and peace of the Father of Light be with you.”

¹⁴ *three-striper* – Arm-patch of a sergeant; more advanced rank in the Soviet army

“Hello, prophet of Paul. How are you?” says Lääne, trying to sound cheerful.

“All right, just like you. Who will be in your pulpit today?”

I cannot ask him any more. The Skier is already barking at me from his dovecote, threatening me with several days of punishment in the cold cell.

He threatens Lyonka with the same. But he has not noticed Lääne.

My positive mood vanishes immediately, because the things I have heard about the cold cell are less than pleasant. I have no doubt that The Skier will make good on his threat, because there is not a shadow of mercy in his monstrous face.

Forlornly, I go over to Lyonka and express my regret for dragging him into this situation.

But that nineteen-year-old miscreant is wiser and more experienced than I, and he reassures me by saying: “Father, don’t worry. Do everything I do, and everything will be fine.”

Our twenty minutes of breathing fresh air are over. From his perch above us, The Skier hands us over to the female corridor guard, who will take us back to our cell. Pointing at Lyonka and me, he declares that both of us will be sent to the black hole.

The fair-haired maiden gestures for us to follow her and takes us to the cell door. There, she begins to take roll. When it is Lyonka’s turn, she stops and begins making notes into a notebook. She asks the boy: “Surname?”

Lyonka replies: “Sidorov.”

“Given name?”

“Vyacheslav,” he lies, without batting an eye.

“Father’s name?”

“Ivan.” End of conversation. Lyonka slips into the cell.

I am the last in line. When it is my turn, the procedure is repeated: “Surname?” the epauletted maiden asks.

I reply: “Beloved.” She dutifully records this in her notebook.

“Given name?”

“Dearly.” Lyonka has taught me well.

“Father’s name?”

“August.”

Everything is duly noted. For good measure, she also asks me: “Date of birth?”

She had not asked Lyonka for his date of birth. But I am sure I must lie in response to this question as well.

“1911.” I am delighted to make myself five years younger, although most certainly I could or would not make any advances on this Russian girl.

I enter the cell with more dignity than Lyonka. I actually bow to the guard. In all my other actions, I imitated everything my wise advisor had done.

Not until the following evening do they begin looking for Sidorov and Beloved in the cells. They start with Cell 17. The *korpusnoi* shouts through the *kormushka*: “Sidorov!” No response. He calls again and again, until someone grunts, “He was transferred to another cell!” The *korpusnoi* is satisfied. Then he calls out the other name: “Beloved!” Lyonka shouts back: “He was taken away on a prisoner transport!”

The hatch snaps shut and we are left in peace.

Later, when I was at Lasnamäe Prison, waiting to be taken away on that first prisoner transport, my Baptist colleague Kallis (“*Beloved*”) told me that they had threatened him with the cold cell one day for no apparent reason. They had double-checked his personal information, and the evident discrepancies had confused them. Although the surname was the same, his given names and date of birth were not the ones they were looking for. He was returned to his regular cell.

I have no idea how long they continued to search for Vyacheslav Sidorov and Dearly Beloved in that prison. (This happened in May 1948 at Patarei Prison.)

MY BREAD IS THROWN IN THE TRASH

I have never been a believer in dreams. However, every morning after they wake us, my cellmates ask me to interpret their dreams. Each man believes he has dreamt something meaningful. And woe to me if I should interpret any of these visions as predicting something bad for the future.

In Lasnamäe Prison, before my long journey on the prisoner transport, I myself have an unusual dream. At the prison, the words “transport, transport” echo in our ears; we wait and prepare. None of us dare to hope that we can escape being taken away on this transport. In the life of a prisoner, those two weeks in anticipation of the transport are the most anguishing of all. The men are quiet and depressed. They cannot even curse the lice swarming over the cots in our cell. We try to sing together. I try to comfort them with the eternal Gospel, but in their dejection and anguish, they are comforted by nothing. Whenever they do speak, it is of the Siberian camps. Some have heard that conditions at the camps are better than those at Vasalemma or Mustamäe, but others speak of them as hell, where people are skinned alive, where their nails are yanked out.

That final night in the Lasnamäe holding cell, I have a dream about the fate that will befall me on the following day. The dream goes like this. From an endless line of men, they select me and a young man whose face I do not recognize. Once this army of men has gone, the two of us look around in the empty prison cells. The young man suddenly disappears from my side, and an officer appears, silently beckoning me to follow him. I obey the officer’s order, following him down a spiral staircase, farther and farther down. Finally, we reach a large group of men that he beckons me to join, whereupon he disappears. After that, the dream becomes hazy.

I have no idea how to interpret this dream. However, its meaning becomes clear enough on the following morning.

The prison corridor is bustling with activity. Cell doors are being opened, the rumble of footsteps echoes and then fades in the corridor. All the men in my cell are quiet as mice. When will it be our turn? We look through the barred window. People are standing on the street below. A young soldier arrested in Kronstadt with three Estonian boys and sentenced to ten years for criticizing the Army's miserable grub recognizes his mother and sister among the people standing outside. Perhaps they have heard about the transports being prepared, perhaps they came in from Märjamaa in the hopes of seeing their son and brother once more. He sees them, but they do not know where to look to find him. If we shout, can they hear us?

"Jürisalu, let's sing! Maybe they'll notice us then!" And we sing, and are soon joined by the entire cell. Nobody comes to quiet us. The people on the street start looking up in our direction. Jürisalu presses his nose against the window, staring and singing. Suddenly, a broad smile lights up his face. "They're waving, they're waving! They recognized me!" He is happy. They are truly waving, as are others. The people looking in our direction wipe their eyes and wave until the police arrive to drive them away.

My eyes also seek one special person, but she is waiting to see me for one last time at another location.

Then it is our cell's turn. The lock and bolt clang simultaneously, and forty men must respond "*yest*¹⁵!" in turn, as each one's name is called.

My name is the only one not called. I begin to feel a bit uneasy.

The other men are sent into the corridor after roll call. The *korpusnoi* orders me to stay in the cell.

The thunder of footsteps. The men of my cell are taken away.

Then, a two-striper¹⁶ arrives and takes me to another cell. A young man is standing by the window. As I greet him,

¹⁵ *yest* – "I'm here"

he seems somehow familiar. He explains that he has been left behind by the transport because he has a hernia. That must mean that I, too, have been left behind. I feel the weight lifting from my heart. Soon, the same two-striper returns and takes me to a cell at the end of the corridor. It contains lots of men. I realize that we have been placed in the sick prisoners' cell. They have all been left behind by the prisoner transports. One man approaches me as if he knows me. He greets me and introduces himself as the Baptist preacher Kallis. He makes room for me on his bunk, where we discuss our fate. Suddenly, I recall the incident in Patarei Prison's Cell 17, when I escaped punishment in the black hole by claiming my name was Dearly Beloved ("*Armas Kallis*"). I ask if he had ever been threatened with the black hole during his time in Patarei. He tells me how he had unexpectedly been taken to the door of the cold cell one evening. However, once they realized that his name, date of birth, and other statistics did not correspond with those of the prisoner they were looking for, they sent him back to his cell. Now, after finally learning the reason behind that incident, he finds it rather amusing. I look around the cell, trying to discern opportunities for spreading the Gospel. The door opens suddenly and an officer steps in. His appearance takes me aback. Although I have never seen him before in my life, he also seems familiar, just like the young man with the hernia. It is then that I remember my dream. Nobody has to tell me that the officer has come for me.

He holds a sheet of paper, from which he reads a single name: "Haamer?"

"*Yest.*"

"Given name and patronymic?"

"Harri, son of Aleksander."

"Date of birth?"

"1906."

"Prepare yourself and your belongings."

¹⁶ *two-striper* – Arm patch of a mid-ranking officer in the Soviet army

I grab my coat, blanket and bundle from the bunk. I call “Good bye, brothers!” and leave. And then the officer leads me down a spiral staircase. Exactly like in the dream.

Apparently, they are missing one from the total number of prisoners to be transported. And the lot falls to me. Now the person compiling the list of transportees can sleep well: he has fulfilled his plan.

There are no men anywhere in sight. The yard is littered with papers, letters, books, bowls and pots confiscated during the search. They are just finishing the search of the women. I find out that the women will be transported along with us. It seems that, with the exception of the sick prisoners’ cell, Lasnamäe Prison has been emptied completely.

The officer hands me over to a soldier, who orders me to take off my clothes right there. The all-too-familiar thievery begins once again. And yet, the only loot that this man with the red epaulettes gets from me is my wife’s letter, my belt and my New Testament. He orders me to read the letter and throw it away. That is how I must say good-bye to my wife, tearing to pieces the letter that I have kept with me as kind of a talisman. He puts my belt aside and throws the New Testament into a garbage bin.

I turn to the soldier with a question that startles him: “Why did you throw my bread into the trash bin?”

“What do you mean – your bread?”

“Look, that book is my bread. If I cannot read it, I will starve to death.”

The Russian boy’s interest is aroused. He retrieves my New Testament from the trash bin and asks: “What kind of book is this?”

“It is God’s Word.”

“Then it’s a Bible?” he asks. “But you’re not allowed to take it with you.”

“But if I ask you for permission, is it still not allowed?”

Apparently, this soldier has his heart in the right place. He stops a passing officer and shows him my book. The officer says, “All right, give it to him,” but is suddenly seized by

doubts, and takes my treasure to a table where several other officers sit. In the meantime, I have dressed myself once again and approach the table to sign for the things that have been taken from me.

My belt and my New Testament lie on the table. Neither one is returned to me. My belt is confiscated because I could use it to hang myself. My New Testament is kept from me because I might use it to spread propaganda.

A haughty captain sitting at the table reassures me: “You’ll get it back when we get there.”

“But I’m asking you to give it to me now. We may have a very long trip. And if I cannot read this book, I will die,” I beg.

“Then write your name in the book. That way I’ll know it’s yours and you’ll get it back when we get there,” the captain replies stubbornly.

Once again, I turn to him beseechingly. “Please let me take the book with me. If you don’t let me keep my book, you might as well not give me any bread at all.”

“Go,” says the captain darkly.

I leave them very sadly. I turn around to look at them one more time. He calls me back, takes my book from the table and gives it to me, grunting: “Take your book.”

I thank him and bless him to the best of my ability. Then, they open the door of a cell filled with men, some who I know, some who are strangers.

The men shower me with questions, utterly amazed that I would be registered for the long prisoner transport. They had all been convinced that I would be spared.

I then tell them about my dream, the one that came true so soon and so precisely. I share my provisions with them, the ones which my wife managed to give me at the last minute. They now seem excessive, and I have nowhere to keep them anyway. Finally, I show them my most valuable loaf of bread, which the grace of God has saved from the garbage bin.

My book would have met the same fate as my belt, which I never saw again, even though I had given them my signature.

But this world is teeming with foolishness and lies.
(Lasnamäe Prison, July 19, 1948.)

End of the sample

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