

Lubyanka prison, 27 November 1936

My cell is a narrow, rectangular affair, three meters wide by four meters in length, with a stained concrete floor, rude masonry walls and a sturdy steel door bearing the disquieting imprint of the labor camp where it was manufactured. There is one small window. High and out of reach, it is so encrusted with dirt that little light enters. My sole source of illumination is a single bulb that burns dimly around the clock, something that was at first bothersome but to which I'm growing accustomed. I sleep, or try to, on a rude metal cot with a thin, badly stained mattress. Into the little space that remains they've wedged a battered old desk and a flimsy chair, probably castoffs from some petty bureaucrat's office. What function they might serve eludes me as I've been denied the right to correspond. I leave for last my lodgings' most unpleasant feature, a metal pail euphemistically referred to as the "honey pot," which generates a stench so unpleasant that during my first days in this hellhole it was difficult to breathe.

Over the years I have heard tales of how prisoners adapt. Now that I've joined their ranks I'm not sure whether getting used to such indignities is something to celebrate. But I refuse to despair. I've done nothing wrong, and before long this horrible injustice will be sorted out.

I was notified of my reassignment three months ago, in August, while posted as *Izvestia* correspondent to Washington. There was little to suggest that anything was amiss. All who serve the Soviet Union are well aware of the pretexts that Moscow Center employs to recall officers who have fallen out of favor, like the sudden illness of a spouse or an accident involving one's child, but such events aren't normally celebrated with elaborate champagne receptions, good-bye gifts and congratulatory speeches by colleagues and well-wishers. Moments after the embassy's communications officer decoded the message that brought to a close my two years of service as *Izvestia* correspondent to Washington, my superior, Ambassador Troyanovsky, announced that after a brief sojourn in the Soviet capital I would be sent to Great Britain. It would be disingenuous to say that I wasn't apprehensive, as sham transfers aren't exactly unknown, but his words seemed sincere, and after fifteen years in the Soviet secret service, much of it spent under the guise of being a foreign correspondent, it was easy enough to attribute my unease to a bad case of Bolshevik paranoia.

*Stalin's Witnesses* – excerpt from prison diary

A few weeks earlier we had gathered in the embassy's projection room to watch clips from the trial this past August where sixteen comrades, among them several leading Party officials, took the stand and one after the other tearfully confessed that they had conspired to assassinate Stalin, wreck Soviet industry and abandon the country to its mortal enemies, Germany and Japan. That high-ranking Bolsheviks would participate in such a scheme seemed astounding – to me, it still does – but they spoke earnestly and their detailed accounts left little to the imagination. A few staffers actually fell ill.

As Soviet law prescribes, each of the accused was shot within twenty-four hours of the verdict, with no right to appeal. To execute comrades of high rank is an unprecedented step, and the auditorium remained quiet well after the projector ceased whirring. Troyanovsky tried to lift the mood with a small speech praising Procurator-General Vyshinsky's tireless efforts and brilliant investigation for thoroughly discrediting the plot's kingpin, the exile Trotsky, then in his seventh year of running around Europe, spouting off against the General Secretary and trying to spur a counterrevolution.

It's no secret that many loyal Communists, myself included, favored Trotsky at a time when such sentiments were widespread and, I might add, perfectly legal. It's also true that as the ambassador pointed out – I might add, with a glance in my direction – all had ample opportunity to recant their errors, so the few who failed to live up to their end of the bargain have only themselves to blame. Still, his comments were disturbing. Were any of us at risk? No one dared ask. Truly, all notions of “democracy in the party” vanished long ago.

Throughout the talk I spotted more than a few sallow faces, but as we filed out things livened up. Surely, went the whispers, treachery that severe left the authorities no option, especially now that fascists are breathing down our necks. Looking back on that day I suppose we just wanted to put it all behind us.

In the USSR the verdicts were celebrated with speeches and rallies. But world reaction was mixed. Troyanovsky told me to do what I could to counter the onslaught of virulent anti-Soviet propaganda, but nothing could stop the capitalist press from harping about our reliance on confessions, a curious posture as that is the main way of securing convictions in the West. As for

calling the results “preordained,” a smooth trial hardly seems something to criticize. Is it preferable that the accused deny their guilt?

Then the other shoe dropped. There I was, trying to sell my American counterparts on the wonders of Soviet justice when rumors began to float around the embassy about a second trial. Its scope seemed remarkably similar to the first, with Trotsky reprising his role as the enabler of an Axis-inspired plot to destabilize the motherland. What shook me up was that authorities kicked off their campaign by running *Izvestia* through the wringer, publicly disparaging my colleagues for their lack of patriotism, then added fuel to the fire by arresting the famous journalist Karl Radek and accusing him of being Trotsky’s main go-between.

Radek and I – at the time of his arrest he was nominally my editor – go back a long way. Although not all my memories of him are pleasant, to argue that he was a fascist stooge seemed awfully far-fetched. Still, it was true that Radek was for a time Trotsky’s most fervent disciple, at least until Stalin had them both exiled. In those days a bullet to the back of the head wasn’t yet the preferred solution, and Trotsky was deported to Europe. Amazingly, Radek was allowed to remain and eventually clawed himself back into the General Secretary’s good graces. I hadn’t seen him since my going-away party in Moscow, and before that had steered clear of the man for years, so I managed to convince myself that his turn to counterrevolutionary activity was somehow plausible.

On a breezy afternoon only a month ago, as Washington enjoyed its last breath of fall, Galina, our son Georgie and I got together with Paul Ward and his wife at their fine home just outside the capital. While our wives took Georgie for a stroll, Paul and I sat in a “small” kitchen. Nearly the size of our Moscow apartment, it was equipped in typical American fashion with all the conveniences of a fine restaurant.

Affluence has not blinded Paul to his country’s failings. The respected political columnist of *The Nation* was one of the first to point out Germany’s threat to world peace and criticize as incredibly wrong-headed the isolationist tendencies of the American Congress. Regrettably, while many writers and intellectuals openly support the Soviet cause, neither Paul nor I had much success persuading legislators to join in, and he and I both fear that by the time the U.S. grasps that its future and ours are entwined it may be too late. Prick the skin of most Americans

*Stalin's Witnesses* – excerpt from prison diary

and out oozes European blood. What will it take for the most powerful nation on Earth to come to its senses?