

## Sakhalin Island (excerpt)

Eduard Verkin

Translated from the Russian by Reilly Costigan-Humes and Isaac Stackhouse Wheeler

I looked to the west, towards the continent, and for a moment, I thought I could actually see it. A dark, heavy Fata Morgana rose over the thin horizon; was it the coast reflected on the sky, rainclouds, or fumes from the still blazing forests? The white “Enola” ran between the “Kappa” and the invisible coast, balancing like a woodchip on the horizon—it was at the ready. Nearby, to the northeast, floating in a light, preposterous haze, was Sakhalin, looking unexpectedly green and magnificent. After what Pavel, the official, had said, I was expecting something else. It may have just been my eyes playing tricks on me, though, an effect caused by the sun, the morning, and the fresh air that felt overwhelming after my time in that stuffy cabin.

Moneron, a huge rock dropped here in the turmoil of creation, lay before us. From up close, I had the impression that the island was moving; its surface was fluid and alive, and at first, I thought I was just imagining things.

The captain’s mate didn’t find the air and wind inspiring. He was still making sombre, awkward advances, but this time he wasn’t trying to impress me with his sabre, his sparkling uniform jacket, or his dashing deportment. He unexpectedly gave me a little present, a book called *A Traveler’s Guide to the Island Region*. It was published as a pocket edition almost a century ago, and those years had whittled it down, left it worn and frayed, but the dense paper was still intact. The text was printed along the edges of the pages, and it was actually readable. I found the page I was looking for and read a short passage about Moneron while the “Kappa” neatly drew close to the island. As the ship approached, I began to realize why I’d thought the island was alive.

It was packed with Chinese people. At first glance, it seemed as though they took up half the island, but that obviously wasn't true; they were just huddled together on the stretch of land sloping gently toward the strait. It was a surprising sight. No, I'd seen big crowds before, like tens of thousands gathering in squares on holidays—but here...

The mate offered his binoculars, but I didn't want to look at the people. That mate did the Wakkanai-Kurilsk-Kholmsk route four times a year. He commented that there were fewer refugees on Moneron, probably due to the harsh, yet snowless winter. I noticed that there were no barracks, tents, or any other domiciles on the shore to help them get through the winter. Captain's Mate Tatsuo said that people waited out the winter in burrows and dugouts, which acted as a useful quarantine measure, since only the healthiest and most resilient, those prepared to meet Sakhalin face to face, survived long enough to emigrate. Furthermore, a great deal of seaborne refuse driven into the Strait of Tartary by the fall and winter storms washed up on Moneron, so people waiting to be evacuated from the island could make everything imaginable out of it. For example, some of them had figured out how to melt bottles, mix the plastic with cotton, and use it to make warm coats. There were rumors that the islands also had permanent residents, a family that lived in an old bunker, robbed of their humanity by the long years on Moneron.

Tatsuo smirked and immediately started telling me that people lost their humanity pretty quickly; most of them landed here without any to begin with. There were reports of rampant... The mate's smirk was too confidential for my liking, and I was afraid that he was about to tell me the hideous details and describe the islanders' unbridled ways. Fortunately, he was interrupted by a siren, which caused quite a stir on the shore. The siren made Captain's Mate Tatsuo choke, and now he was coughing and spitting phlegm over the side, while I kept looking at the island.

Even though it was summer, the island was yellow with black patches. I asked the mate why vegetation hadn't taken hold here; after all, even on burnt-out Iturup, some plants still languished on the banks of the streams. Tatsuo, who had finally finished spitting, let out a condescending laugh and explained that the people had devoured all the chance grass, lichen, and algae while they were waiting out the winter, leaving nothing but stones behind. They'd eaten all the dirt on Moneron and licked its stones clean. The people stuck there had even managed to consume the old red brick chapel.

The siren screeched again, and the movement on the island intensified; the Chinese refugees were huddling close to the shore, making it feel like the island was tilting forward and was about to take a scoop of water. Tatsuo laughed and said this was the funny part, when they all start running and trampling each other, and that it'd be even funnier if we had ourselves a little target practice.

Now that we were getting closer to the shore, I thought that boats or rafts would be launched, but that didn't happen. Our bulk freighter turned its broadside to the island, and then it all started. The women lunged into the water first. Each of them held empty plastic bottles in their hands as they swam for the "Kappa."

Seeing how surprised I was, the mate started explaining what was happening, pointing and trying to shove the binoculars into my hands, but they were still warm from his touch, so I refused. Then he started offering me a weapon. I couldn't tell if he was serious. Then the team was suddenly armed with assault rifles, and Tatsuo was grumbling that he'd run to the armory and grab me a bullpup if I liked—an excellent machine, graceful, slender, small caliber, but it was loaded with depleted uranium rounds, they hit like nails...

I began to feel a little sick. The women were swimming towards us too earnestly; they were too determined, and that made me sick for some reason. The way they moved, full of

animal strength, was unpleasant to look at. Perhaps it was being so close to the captain's mate that was making me sick, though; he was breathing heavily, still talking to me.

Some fifty vessels—mostly cutters and reequipped seiners that fished refugees from the mainland out of the strait every day—were on patrol in the strait that day, enforcing the policy of isolation. There were still a lot of refugees, though not as many as there used to be. Most of the people trying to escape the mainland were men; there were fewer women and even fewer children—obviously, they sent the children straight to Japan. The rest of them were brought to the quarantine zone on Moneron. As the island filled up (but no more often than once every three months), they were picked up by Kholmsk-bound vessels.

Nobody was monitoring the evacuation from Moneron at first, but the prefecture administration had to get involved soon, since women weren't surviving on the island, and the prefecture was mostly interested in women. A quota was set, and the evacuation was conducted on the basis of a ten-to-one ratio, i.e. you had to let one woman aboard for every ten men you evacuated. The survival rate for women on the island increased, since they were the first to board. There, look at 'em swim.

An officer I didn't know came up to the captain's mate, and they started betting on who would swim to the ship first, then began cheering their favorites on. Tatsuo won.

I think at least fifty women swam up to the ship. They were bobbing in the waves, and I could hear something knocking against the steel of the "Kappa"—plastic bottles and heads. A cargo net was lowered into the water, and the women clambered up it, threw themselves over the side of the ship, and lay on the deck for a while, panting and coughing up water as the doctor, dressed in a rubber suit, came up to each of them, examined their eyes, ears, and mouths. Then the crew goaded the lucky ladies into the hold with occasional kicks. Some of the women were so weak that they couldn't climb aboard. No sooner had they lifted

themselves slightly out of the water than they collapsed into it again, exhausting themselves more with each attempt. The crew of the “Kappa” found this very amusing; they sent spit and curses down at the refugees by way of encouragement. When they’d run out of steam and were left floating listlessly in the water, clinging to the nets, a crane was switched on, which retracted the net, held them hanging over a hatch, and dumped them into the hold.

The “Kappa” gave two long blasts from its horn, which meant that it was the men’s turn. Suddenly, they were all swimming towards us from the shore. I noted that the refugees weren’t just competing with one another to swim towards the ship faster but were also trying to kill one another, with stones or their fists. Captain’s Mate Tatsuo explained that they always had more men than they needed, and each of the swimmers knew that someone else could take his spot, so he would try to neutralize that someone else at the first opportunity and free up some living space for himself.

The men reached the bulk freighter faster than the women. They grabbed the side and began banging on it with their fists in insistent unison, so I, standing above them, could feel their strength and rage, and found myself involuntarily imagining what might happen if they got out of control. I doubt the crew’s assault rifles would stop them. That was unlikely, of course, and not even because of the rifles. The refugees from the mainland knew that leaving on a freighter was their only chance, and they weren’t about to throw it away.

The “Kappa” swayed as the climb began. The men acted independently and resolutely, scaling the net, running up to the doctor, opening their mouths, bugging out their eyes, and jumping down into the hold. Next, the sailors hurried to the hatches, opened cylinders full of stinking disinfectant gas and tossed them inside, while others shoveled white antiseptic powder over their heads. The smooth, practiced loading process continued.

The water around the “Kappa” boiled with refugees. They were floundering near the ship, screaming, killing one another, hanging from the net like bunches of grapes, continuing to throw themselves over the side faster than they could get down into the hold. Soon the whole deck was packed with drenched men. I watched. Captain’s Mate Tatsuo, evidently trying to impress me once again, whipped out his revolver and shot several of the Chinese refugees who had almost reached their goal. That did nothing to stop the rest of them, though; they just kept coming and coming.

Unexpectedly, the freighter let out several sharp horn blasts, and the sailor standing to my right lifted his rifle and fired a long burst into the air. Captain’s Mate Tatsuo explained that the “Kappa” had taken on roughly thirty tons of refugees and wouldn’t be taking on any more, since that was its maximum capacity in its current condition.

That did nothing to restrain the men, though; they just kept climbing the net, so the sailors started firing again, but not into the air.

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We rode past the mines, and I focused on the sensations that struck me when I saw their monstrous grandeur, tried committing them to memory. Perhaps it was despair. Yes, despair. All those people and mechanisms were working with hasty despair, looking like hyenas hurrying to rip apart the carcass of an antelope before the lion arrived, but the moronic beasts, preoccupied with dividing up their windfall, didn’t know that the lion was already there, and that he had picked out his victims, knew his precise sequence of lethal motions, and was just waiting for the right moment to leap out of his hiding place and begin his bloody dance, and the hyenas didn’t even know it. And the lion didn’t know that he’d died a long time ago.

We drew closer to what had once been Shakhtersk, and the coal pits became more extensive and the air more polluted. Again and again, the road passed through sooty whirlwinds and dust clouds, and the images that stood out through those whirlwinds were more and more bizarre and phantasmagoric. The earth was ravaged by strange machines for which no names had been invented yet, towers loomed high, assembled from bent beams and rusty barrels, and beside them stood great structures that served some unknown purpose: masts with foul rags fluttering on them, perforated metal bubbles, needle-like metal bubbles, smooth bubbles, tripods crowned with angular hoppers, and something that looked like desalination equipment. I thought Tatsuo could probably have told me what all those machines were for, but I didn't ask him. I didn't want to know.

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Ugolyok Prison, located not far from the camp where imprisoned Chinese settlers were held after the war, was the oldest correctional facility on Sakhalin. Naturally, they were not given any food or water. The latter problem was solved by the rain and fog, but the former was more difficult. Eventually, they learned to derive nourishment from the earth itself. They dug burrows and ate the soil, gradually sinking themselves into the earth. When the authorities could no longer control the camp, they purged it with phosgene gas. The prisoners' unique way of organizing the space into pits and radiating paths was later used when the Uglegorsk labor colony was established. Those were difficult times; Japan wasn't capable of handling large construction projects outside its own territory, yet the need to control deviant elements within that territory was urgent, so the nearby coal pits were chosen as the site for a prison complex. It was fitted with fixtures and poured concrete, a broad stone basin partitioned into small cages with thick fences, producing a cheap prison with a large holding capacity.

I must note that the prison had only changed for the worse since it was built; nobody did any renovations or spared a thought for improvements. When I first saw the state of the place, I couldn't help but think that it had been made that way on purpose. Tatsuo stopped our all-terrain vehicle, and we looked at Ugolyok for a while. Honestly, very little about it resembled a prison; it looked more like an abandoned radio telescope with some rat nursery built in its basin. Or maybe it looked like a nest. Yes, a nest, but one woven from barbed wire instead of twigs. The wire was hung on concrete poles driven into the ground; it had been stolen in some places and rusted beyond recognition in others. I could see holes everywhere; it was clear that the wire performed no security function whatsoever.

Tatsuo confirmed that was the case; the wire wasn't there to protect the prison. There was nothing to protect. Everything worth stealing was long gone. On the other hand, there hadn't been a single documented escape from Ugolyok in the last few years, since there was no reason to escape. The people who lived nearby dreamed of the day when someone would go for it, since they could receive a reward for turning an escapee in. There used to be a booming industry here, based on a conspiracy between the guards, the prisoners, and the local Chinese population. The guards would facilitate an escape, the prisoners would go to a nearby shelter, and the people would bring them back. They'd divvy up the reward, fair and square, and give the prisoner a new sentence. The prisoner always knew what he was getting out of it: an extra winter coat, an extra bucket of coal, or a piece of plastic sheeting to shield himself from the autumn rains.

When Tatsuo's father Matsuo became the new warden, he put a stop to that practice. The warden would still pay the reward, but he tripled the number of lashes the escapee would receive. Soon there were no more escapes.

We continued looking at the prison.



Rusty masts rose out of the earth in every direction, converging above the center of the pit. Rusty chains dangled from them, their tails dropping into the cages. Tatsuo turned off the engine and explained that those chains were used as condensers. In the mornings, fog would slide down from the foothills and get tangled up in the chains. Fresh water would run down them; combined with the rain, it made up the liquid ration that every prisoner had to take care of personally. I asked how the prison was heated. After all, the condensers probably froze in the winter, meaning the prisoners would have to endure thirst as well as cold. Tatsuo explained that the heating at Ugolyok was decentralized; every inmate received a certain amount of coal every month, which was dropped into their cages from a radial conveyer belt. They used it to fuel small stoves. They got their water by tugging on the chains to break off chunks of ice and then melting it in tin cans.

Why hadn't Ulegorsk—which wasn't the most backward part of Sakhalin, after all—taken any steps to provide better conditions for the inmates? Obviously hard labor involves some physical hardship and spiritual torment, but there are reasonable limits to everything. Plus, the Emperor's last speech was about making society more humane. Tatsuo answered that they had all read the Emperor's speech with great enthusiasm and taken it under advisement. More specifically, his father had sent a shipment of bodywarmers to Ugolyok, along with five hundred plastic hard hats, which they could use to take care of all sorts of things. Furthermore, significant funds had been allotted for these humanitarian efforts, though Tatsuo admitted with a smile that Three Brothers and Light Air prisons had appropriated most of them, which was hardly a surprise. Only certain classes were subjected to these humanitarian efforts, since the cruder classes would merely be corrupted and given groundless hope. Furthermore, the convicts contained at Ugolyok had committed crimes that were not so much horrific as unscrupulous—offenses against human nature—so all the hardships they endured in winter and summer alike would do them good. Tatsuo assured us

that attrition among the inmates wasn't all that high nonetheless. Obviously, it was higher than at the similar institutions in Aleksandrovsk and Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, but it didn't exceed the mortality rate at the Ulegorsk coal pits.

My attention was drawn to an odd detail—the chains hanging over the cells held a round cage with a man sitting inside. I looked closer and saw that he was alive, and also that he was a black man. I asked what he was doing there. Tatsuo smirked and answered that he was there to intensify the spiritual torment inflicted upon the inmates in order to humble the criminal conceit raging within them and soften their lawless ways. Furthermore, he explained that having a live black man in a cage hanging over the convicts' heads made it easier for them to endure their deprivations, especially in the wintertime, since he awakened rage and bubbling vitality in them, strengthening their bodies.

Our arrival had not gone unnoticed; the man proceeded to wail, hit the bars with an iron pipe, and shake his cage, making it describe broad circles up above the prison. Tatsuo said that kind of behavior was perfectly normal for the African-American prisoners; not one of them, no matter how obstinate, was still of sound mind by the end of his first year. They did take great pains to make sure they didn't die too quickly; after all, it wasn't that easy to find a black man in Ulegorsk. For a while, the common practice was to hire someone to sit in the cage, but they put a stop to that because the inmates could tell that the black man was an imposter, which led to unrest. Things ended poorly for two of the hired African Americans.

All the while, the insane man kept shaking his cage, and its arc grew wider and wider. It whistled through the air as the man shouted and drummed with iron on iron. The other inmates woke up in their cells and also began to rattle their chains and shout incoherently.

They gradually began to settle into the man's rhythm, catching it and multiplying the noise. Boom. Boom. Boom.

Suddenly, he fell silent, and, as if on cue, so did the others. The cage began describing nervous ellipses over their heads, the chains creaking and rattling. I noted that it was an unbelievable sight, and that I was feeling uncomfortable, as if something bad was just about to happen. Artyom coiled up in his seat in our all-terrain vehicle and began rapidly rubbing his temples. His teeth clenched, his lips went pale, and his cheek began twitching.

Tatsuo explained that this was apparently one of the prison's new rituals; back when his father was the warden, there was no such practice. He added that, according to the statistics available, the rate of recidivism among prisoners shipped to Ugolyok was almost three times lower than among those released from other institutions.

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The town of Yuzhny was sustained by the prison and the power plants. It wasn't just the people who served at the prison who relied on it for their livelihoods; there were many who were indirectly involved in supporting it. There was an extensive food supply subcontracting system. Twice a year, the prison administration organized tenders for the local producers. The foodstuffs were cultivated right there in the city and the surrounding area, which had abundant millet fields, mollusc hatcheries, and rabbit ranches, as well as drying and smoking facilities. The producers who offered the lowest prices became the prison's suppliers.

The warden of Light Air told us at our subsequent meeting that the subcontracting system enabled the prison to meet its needs and goals in the best possible way. Firstly, the crudest, lowest-quality products were delivered to the prison, which facilitated punishment, making it more comprehensive, turning the convict laborers' thoughts away from the

corporeal and toward repentance. Secondly, the subcontracting system encouraged the development of agriculture on the island, which would play a positive role in the region's future. Thirdly... At that point, the warden hesitated for a moment, and then clearly flustered, declared that, thirdly, the food supply contracts made it possible to save a great deal of money from the budget, which could then be put toward improving conditions for the prison employees. Life in the area was obviously hard, and monetary compensation only went so far in making up for the deprivation and mental strain that both military personnel and civilian employees faced on Sakhalin.

In short, a small but resilient economy was built around Light Air, from ranchers who sold rabbits for a nickel to the mountain rickshaw drivers whose services were so useful to the prison personnel. Their positions entitled them to all-terrain vehicles, but they refrained from using them, since the rickshaws were three times cheaper than maintaining a vehicle.

The other pillar of Yuzhny's economy was operating the two nearby power plants. One of them was fuelled by coal delivered by train from Uglegorsk. That one provided uninterrupted energy and heat for the whole district, the garrison, and one of the Aniva airbases. The second power plant was highly experimental, using dried corpses soaked in fuel oil to generate electricity. Honestly, I had thought the rumors of a power plant that ran on corpses were exaggerated, but they turned out to be true.

Yuzhny, like many towns on Sakhalin, was built in a thin strip that ran from north to south. The power plants were in the northern area. I wasn't interested in the main coal-fired plant, but I visited the model corpse-fired one.

The chief engineer, a nice young man named Ozaki, didn't even look at my papers from the prefecture; he said that the plant was operating at half capacity due to the heat, so he

had plenty of time to show us around. That sounded good to me. Ozaki handed out some hard hats, and we began our inspection.

Honestly, I found the model power plant rather underwhelming. I had been expecting something diabolical, but the place was hardly different from any regular coal- or oil-fired facility. The corpses had lost any sense of individuality; they were more like logs—identical shape, identical size, black. They looked like briquettes. They were moved into the ovens on conveyor belts, so the process was almost completely automated, except for a man on duty at the end, whose task was to straighten the briquettes.

Had the experiment been successful? Chief Engineer Ozaki answered that it had been more than successful. Using corpses as fuel was efficient and environmentally friendly. First of all, they burned twice as long as coal while emitting equal calories of energy. Secondly, burning them did not emit radioactive substances, which was not true of trees that had grown after the war. Maybe Aleksandrovsk thought it was fine to burn wood for all their power needs, and damn the consequences, but Yuzhny would think about those consequences. This promising technology made it possible to dispose of corpses they had nowhere to put otherwise. According to Chief Engineer Ozaki's calculations, even if one didn't count illegal immigrants from the continent, the existing population was sufficient to keep the plant in operation for sixty years, easily enough to recoup the costs of building and maintaining it and make a hefty profit.

He led Yorsh and me to his office and offered us tea and pastries, not neglecting to mention that the electricity used to prepare them had been generated from corpses. Like many of the Japanese people compelled to serve on Karafuto, he was very open and eagerly answered our many questions.

He told us that there were a lot of illegal or barely legal ventures in and around the city, but the local government turned a blind eye to them. The widespread theft of coal, in which the convict experts who worked in the energy sector were often directly complicit, had become commonplace, and was listed in reports as “losses incurred during transportation.” The business of producing protein powder from mollusks dumped on the Aniva coast and secretly collected at night, was booming. Obviously, practically all the mollusks were radioactive, but nobody really cared about that. The pressed protein bars sold in the markets were always accompanied by anti-radiation meds stolen from the military warehouses. There were also the fuel warehouses, which were confined to the westernmost areas of the city for fire safety purposes. They were built near the volcanic mountain, and from a distance, they looked like a procession of anthills assembled from fallen trees. Several of them had long since been turned into shelters. Dried branches were mashed together with putrid pine needles and moss. Overgrown with grass, they formed artificial hills. Nobody knew for sure what went on in those abodes of crime and anarchy.