

THE ENERGY OF LIFE by Vladimir Megré

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John Woodsworth, translator • Dr Leonid Sharashkin, editor

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Chapter 26

A SECURITY ZONE OF THE FUTURE

For the past five evenings Nikolai Ivanovich¹ — the warden of a maximum-security correctional facility (in plain language, a *prison*) — had not been able to leave his office at the usual time. When his workday officially ended he turned his telephone ringer off and began pacing his office, deep in contemplation. Occasionally he would sit down at his desk, pick up the green folder lying on it and peruse its contents for the umpteenth time.

A convict serving time for an infraction of Article 93, Clause 1, of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation had put forward a petition to him on behalf of a group of inmates in Cell 26, with what at first glance looked like an unthinkable proposal.

The convict, whose name was Khodakov, proposed acquiring for the facility a hundred hectares of abandoned or unused arable land, to be surrounded by a barbed-wire fence with a watch-tower at each corner — in other words, taking all due precaution to prevent escapes. On this fenced-in hundred hectares ninety prisoners would be engaged in agricultural labour. The applications of those interested were kept in a file in this green folder.

¹*Nikolai Ivanovich* (pron. *Nee-ka-LYE i-VAHN-yeh*) — first name plus patronymic (cf. footnote 9 in Book 1, Chapter 1: “The ringing cedar”). The name *Nikolai* also has an endearing form: *Kolya*.

In their applications these prisoners committed themselves to supply the whole facility with vegetables, to the tune of half of all the produce they grew on the land. The other half they asked to be sent to their families. So far, nothing impossible in their request. In various correctional facilities prisoners are engaged in manufacturing activity. In some cases this involves crafting simple objects in woodworking shops, in others — organised textile production, where prisoners sew simple items of clothing, such as quilted jackets or underpants, and receive a nominal wage for their work. The low wage is also due to the rather low level of productivity involved.

According to the proposal in the file, the prisoners wanted to take up agriculture. Well, no problem there either. A payment of half of their produce was entirely feasible. No need to bother with selling stuff, or shipping off products on consignment and then waiting months for the proceeds to come in. But that wasn't all...

Khodakov, on behalf of the other prisoners, asked that the hundred hectares be divided into one-hectare plots, each plot to be assigned to a specific prisoner. In addition, they asked that each prisoner be granted the right to build a one-room cell-hut on their plot. There was also a request that any prisoner who wished to, be allowed to stay on their land after serving their sentence, and then for the prison not to collect as a levy but to purchase surplus produce from them, as well as to allow them to enlarge their dwellings.

The file containing the proposal, or request, had been given to Nikolai Ivanovich as far back as six months ago. Along with the ninety applications and the text of the proposal, the file also included plans for the future plots, handsomely executed in coloured pencil. The drawings showed the watch-towers, the barbed wire and the controlled-entry point.

After his initial reading Nikolai Ivanovich tucked the green folder away in the bottom drawer of his desk. From time to time he would mentally go over its contents, but he had not given any answer to the prisoners.

A certain circumstance had come about, however, which caused the warden to spend every evening over the past five days in intensive contemplation of the prisoners' proposal. An order had come from the national administration to take steps, beginning the following year, to enlarge the facility and construct additional cells, with a view to being ready to accept a hundred and fifty new convicts by the year's end. The order was accompanied by plans for additional wards to be attached to the existing buildings, along with a financing schedule. It was proposed to use prisoner labour in the construction.

Nikolai Ivanovich mused as follows: *The financing will be delayed as usual, and there will be problems procuring low-cost materials. They put one set of prices for construction materials into the budget, but when it comes to the actual building, it's something else already. Prisoner labour is never very efficient. The order is patently impossible to carry out.*

But there was no question that it *had* to be carried out. Nikolai Ivanovich's retirement was only five years away. He had already attained the rank of colonel. He had been the warden of this facility for twenty years now, without a single black mark on his record. And now this order.

But these concerns were not uppermost in the colonel's deliberations. The green folder! In his memo Prisoner Khodakov stated that his proposal would fulfil the principal objective of incarcerating prisoners in such institutions — namely, rehabilitation.

The fact that modern correctional institutions seldom succeed in their rehabilitation efforts — indeed, quite the contrary, they end up producing more experienced criminals — was not lost on Nikolai Ivanovich. If this were not so, you wouldn't get them coming back to prison for the second or third

time. Nikolai Ivanovich had given a great deal of time and energy to his calling, and was extremely disturbed by this situation.

His life was getting on now, his term of service was coming to an end, and what was there to show for it? A nursery for criminals, as it turned out.

The green folder! How infectious it was! If only he could confidently conclude that there was something unacceptable in the proposal the file contained! But no. Something inside him would not let him reject it out of hand. But neither could he bring himself to fully support it. It was an offbeat, unconventional proposal.

The next morning, the colonel's first order of the day was to have Prisoner Khodakov from Cell 26 brought to his office.

"You can take a seat, Mr Khodakov," said Nikolai Ivanovich to the man who had just come in, accompanied by an escort guard. The warden gestured to a chair.

"I've just been looking over the contents of your file. I have a specific question for you."

"Sir!" the prisoner hastened to reply, getting up from his chair.

"Sit!" the guard commanded.

"Yes, do sit down," the prison warden replied softly. "No need to jump to your feet the way they do in court." Turning to the escort guard, he added: "You can wait for us outside."

"So, Sergei Yurevich Khodakov, I must say you've submitted a rather strange proposal."

"It only seems strange on the surface. In fact, the proposal is extremely reasonable."

"Then tell me directly, flat out, what kind of cunning plan have you thought up here? Are you aiming to set up the conditions for a mass escape? The ninety candidates applying are all serving sentences of between five and nine years. Does this mean you want your freedom sooner?"

"If there's any cunning plan in this proposal, it has nothing to do with escape, sir." Again the prisoner rose and showed signs of concern. "You've got the wrong impression..."

"Just sit down and relax. And let's dispense with the 'sir'. I'm Nikolai Ivanovich. I know from your file that you are Sergei Yurevich. You used to be a psychologist. You defended your thesis, and then went into business. Your sentence was for major embezzlement — right?"

"Yes, I was sentenced — it was back at the beginning of *perestroika*, after all, Nikolai Ivanovich. You just get used to one set of laws, and suddenly new ones come out..."

"Okay, okay. That's not the issue here. Explain to me what you have in mind with this agricultural zone with a barbed-wire fence, or is there another name for it?"

"I'll try to explain, Nikolai Ivanovich. Only it's hard for me to do that, because of a particular circumstance."

"What circumstance?"

"You see, we've been reading this book — it's called *Anastasia*. Then along came another book, a sequel. Well, anyway, the book talks about Man's purpose in life. About how if everyone living on the Earth took a hectare of land and created a corner of Paradise on it, the whole Earth would be transformed into a Paradise. The book explains this very simply and convincingly."

"Sounds pretty simple to me! If everyone took... and created..., well, then, of course, the whole Earth would be transformed... But what's this got to do with your proposal?"

"I'm trying to tell you: it's all outlined very persuasively in these books. Now some people might just glance over them superficially, and not get everything. But *we* have the time — we've been reading and discussing them, and we understand them."

“So, what have you got out of it?”

“After reading these books, a whole lot of people have the desire to acquire their own land and create a Paradise oasis in their own kin’s domain. They’re free, they can do this. So we’ve decided: even if it’s behind barbed wire, we can still each take a hectare of land, work on it, and make it into something beautiful... By way of a penalty, we suggest handing over half or even more of our produce either to the facility or to the public at large. But we do have a special request — that our plot is not taken away from us when we’ve served our sentence — in other words, those who want to stay on there can remain.”

“So, what does that mean — that you’re going to live out the rest of your lives under the guards’ rifle muzzles?”

“After we’ve all served our sentences, you can take away the barbed-wire fences and cart them off for use somewhere else, along with the towers. You can use them in a another location for a new group of prisoners who want to fix up their own domains — while we stay put on ours.”

“Aha! And then when their time is up, we switch the towers and barbed wire to a third location, while they go on living on their land. Is that it?”

“You’ve got it.”

“Some sort of phantasmagoria! What is it — you want me, the warden of this facility, to create Paradise oases for my prisoners? And are you certain that this can really work?”

“I’m absolutely convinced it will be a success. As a psychologist I’m convinced. And it’s something I feel in my heart. Judge for yourself, Nikolai Ivanovich: someone serves nine years behind bars, and then walks free. He hasn’t any friends. His friends are back in the prison’s security zone, or in their cells. His family doesn’t want anything to do with him. Neither does society at large. Let’s face it, who’ll give an ex-con a decent job? Most job categories are up to their ears in unemployed professionals, and look how many highly qualified people are standing in queue at employment centres. Our society provides no positions for ex-convicts. There’s only one road ahead for them — back to the old routine. And so they follow it, and they end up back here with you again.”

“Yes, I know the scenario. What’s the point in merely stating the obvious? But tell me, as a psychologist, why did the cons who read these books suddenly changed and go for the idea of getting a piece of land behind a barbed-wire fence?”

“Well, you see, they all got a glimpse of eternity on the horizon. Like, people believe you’re still alive, even in a prison cell. Whereas in fact you’re not. You’re dead. Because there’s nothing left for you on life’s horizon.”

“What were you saying about ‘a glimpse of eternity’?”

“I told you, it’s hard for me to explain it right off. It’s all in the books...”

“Okay, I’ll read these books, and try to figure out what’s made you wax so lyrical over this. Then we’ll talk again. Guard, take him away.”

Prisoner Khodakov got up, put his hands behind his back, and asked:

“May I ask one more question?”

“Go ahead,” the colonel agreed.

“When we were working out the plan for this security zone, we took all existing regulations for prisoner holding into account. The proposal does not allow for any violation of these regulations.”

“I say, you’ve thought of everything! The regulations... No violation... I’ll check it out.” Then Nikolai Ivanovich ordered the guard:

“Take him away.”

Subsequently the warden called in the prison's legal counsel. He handed him the file and said:

"Here, take this. Study it thoroughly and determine where there are any violations of prisoner-holding regulations. Report back to me in forty-eight hours."

Forty-eight hours later the legal counsel was sitting in the warden's office. He began his report with a few evasive phrases, atypical for his profession.

"The thing is, Nikolai Ivanovich, that from the point of view of the law and the regulations governing the holding of prisoners in so-called places of confinement, the proposal in question cannot be treated as an open-and-shut case."

"What kind of spin are you trying to give me here, Vasily,² like a lawyer in court? You and I have known each other for fifteen years..."

Nikolai Ivanovich got up from his desk. For some reason he appeared flustered. After pacing around the room for a while, he sat down again and continued:

"Tell me specifically, what have we here by way of regulation violations?"

"Specifically... Well, if you want it specifically, I'll have to take it one step at a time."

"Okay, then. One step at a time."

"We're talking about forming a new security zone here. The proposal allows for the isolation of this area from the outside world. This hundred-hectare zone will be fenced off with two rows of barbed wire. Watch-towers are also provided for. The zone is secured in full accordance with regulations.

"The document goes on to propose the dividing of the security zone into individual plots of one hectare each and assigning each plot to a particular prisoner. Well, what is there to say? The regulations state we should accustom the unconscientious citizens in our charge to hard work, create workshop units for basic production, as well as set up a subsidiary farm and work toward partial self-financing. After all, the law allows for the setting up of institutions such as ours with special provisions for economic activity and multi-purpose use of forest reserves.* In our case this proposal envisages the setting up of a subsidiary farm which will provide those in our charge with a supply of fresh vegetables, with maybe some left over for sale. So far, we're entirely within the limits of the law."

"Don't draw things out. What's next? Where do we go beyond the limits?"

"Well, next it's proposed to construct a separate cell on each plot to provide living accommodations for the prisoner — the one the plot is assigned to as a work-space."

"That's right — each one will have his own individual cell on his piece of land. The thing is, we don't have enough funds to buy regular beds. And here they're asking for a separate cell with all the amenities and furnishings. A utopia!"

"I guess you didn't take a thorough look at all the details of the proposal, Nikolai."

"What d'you mean, not a 'thorough' look? I practically memorised the thing."

"I don't know about that. Don't know about that... But there's an attachment here giving plans and a description of the interior of this individual cell. Everything is strictly according to regulations — one bed, one toilet, one table, one chair, one bookshelf, one night-stand; a metal door with a peep-hole and

²*Vasily* (pron. *va-SEE-lee*) — a common Russian first name. Note that Nikolai and Vasily, because of their long friendship, often omit the patronymic in conversation with each other. In Russian they also call each other by the informal pronoun *ty* (similar to *tu* — instead of *vous* — in French).

**Russian editor's footnote*: Law of the Russian Federation of 21 July 1993, amended 9 March 2001: "On institutions and agencies administering criminal punishment in the form of confinement".

an exterior lock, bars on the windows. As for financing, it's spelled out here specifically: each prisoner is responsible for funding the construction of his own individual cell."

"That wasn't in the document I saw."

"I don't know about that. Don't know about that... Take a look for yourself — it's there. And the sketch, and the working drawings for the builders, and the description."

"What d'you mean, 'it's there'? It wasn't there when I handed you the file to go over. I distinctly remember that it wasn't. I've been over that file a dozen times from cover to cover. And here you... In two days?"

"Yes, I did it, Kolya. I was the one. Only not in two days. They gave me a similar file three whole months ago. I recently put in my own additions and corrections, to which they agreed."

"Why didn't you say anything to me about this earlier?"

"You yourself only asked for my opinion two days ago."

"Okay. Let's hear what you have to say about all this."

"Here's what I think, Nikolai. If this proposal comes to fruition, there'll be a significant decrease in the number of prisons and labour camps in the country, and the crime-rate will be cut in half. And you, Nikolai Ivanovich, will go down in history as a genius of a reformer."

"Never mind history. Let's look at the nitty-gritty. Will it fly from a legal standpoint?" Nikolai Ivanovich once again got up from his desk and began pacing the room.

The legal counsel turned to the warden, who was still pacing the room in serious contemplation, and enquired:

"What are you so concerned about, Nikolai?"

"Me, concerned? Now what I have I got to be concerned about? Anyway... No, you're right, Vasily. I *am* concerned. I'm concerned because I can't decide what I should say about this proposal in my brief to the general."

"Aha, so that's it! So you've decided to support it after all? You've been thinking about taking it to the general?"

"I've been contemplating it. I was thinking you might shoot the proposal down and persuade me not to go see the general. That'd be a weight off my shoulders. So I guess you're in favour of it?"

"Yes, I am."

"That means I've got to go," Nikolai Ivanovich concluded, in a rather cheerful tone, as though he had actually been afraid his friend might shoot the proposal down. The warden stepped over to a cupboard and took down a bottle of cognac, along with some lemon and two shot-glasses.

"Let's drink, Vasily, to our success! Tell me, when was it that you found yourself so favourably disposed toward this file?"

"It wasn't right away."

"Same here."

"My daughter's doing a law degree at an institute. She's in the middle of writing her graduating essay on "The influence of incarceration on the eradication of criminal acts". She gave me a draft to read. I read it, and just listen to what she says:

Ninety percent of those who serve their time in incarceration reoffend. The underlying cause behind these depressing crime statistics is the following:

- a person's upbringing, which has led him to the committing of a criminal act;

- the challenge of adapting to society following the period of incarceration;
- the formation of a criminal world-view during the period of incarceration in a criminal environment!

“Do you realise what her conclusions mean, Nikolai? It turns out that you and I, just by honestly trying to do our duty, are actually helping shape a criminal world-view?”

“We don’t ‘shape’ anything. We act in accord with regulations, the law and the orders we’re given. Although, you know, I too have a lurking sense of dissatisfaction here. I used to put it out of my thought. I’ve been trying to convince myself it’s none of my business.

“But then this file appeared... I’ve been contemplating it for six months now. And I’ve finally decided to go see the general. Only even though I’ve sat down several times to rewrite a report, to make it sound more intelligible, it’s still not coming.”

“Let’s try it together. I think the main thing is not to scare the general off by making it sound too original and outlandish. We’ve got to simplify it.”

“I agree. It should be simpler. But how? Especially since they’re asking to have the land turned over to each prisoner for lifetime use after they’ve finished serving their sentence.”

“Yes, that aspect doesn’t seem realistic for the time being. We don’t have any federal law at the moment on the allocation of land for lifetime use. I’ve thought about this point. We’ll have to be honest with them. When they’ve finished serving their time, the question will be taken up in the context of the land legislation in existence at that time. I think they’ll understand. Everybody knows you can’t go above the law. We don’t make the laws. But we should also point out the direction we see things heading. Right now it all seems to be leading to a law permitting private ownership of land.”

“God willing,” affirmed Nikolai Ivanovich as he poured out a second round of cognac. “Let’s just have another wee dram... To success!”

They clinked glasses. Then all at once Nikolai Ivanovich put his glass down on the table and once more began pacing the room.

“Don’t tell me you’re concerned again?” asked the legal counsel.

“You see, Vasily,” Nikolai Ivanovich rattled on anxiously without pausing, “you and I here have been dreaming big dreams, like youngsters. We’ve got carried away with our dreams, forgetting that we’re dealing here with criminals. There are some among them, of course, that simply took a wrong turn, and may be sincerely willing to get their lives back together within the limits of the law. But the majority of them are hard-core criminals, rounders through and through. They’ve got an entirely different agenda, and what kind of gimmick are they trying to pull here?”

“I’ve thought about that too, Nikolai. But let’s do a test first, and afterward you can decide whether to report to the general or not.”

“How are we going to test them?”

“Here’s how. Tell me, when did they give you this file?”

“About six months ago.”

“That means they’ve been discussing this project for *more* than six months now, working out the drawings and plans. Then they put it all beautifully into a folder and attached ninety application forms. So, let’s you and I gather all the applicants together, suddenly and without warning, in the auditorium. We’ll invite specialists — let’s say, agronomists, specialists in vegetable growing, and have them examine the lot. The examiners can ask questions about things like what to plant in the soil and when,

and we shall see how many would-be responders there are. You know, if they're really serious about this, and they've got hold of this idea without any ulterior motives, if it's a real dream with them, they wouldn't just sit on their fannies, would they now, and wait 'til their proposal's answered. They'd have to be studying agrotechnology."

"Now that's really something, Vasily! Can you imagine rounders spending half a year boning up on how to plant flowers and cucumbers? That's really steep! Maybe a chap raised in the country might know the answer. But for these..."

"That's why I'm telling you, let's test them before deciding whether to go see the general or not."

Upon entering the auditorium they found not ninety, but two hundred prisoners sitting there. By the time the warden had invited the specialists in agrotechnology — two instructors from the agricultural institute and one from the college, the number of would-be domain dwellers had reached two hundred prisoners.

The prisoners had taken their seats in the auditorium, not suspecting that they were to be given a test. They saw the three people sitting behind the table on stage, but had no idea who they were. Then the warden came out and announced:

"In connection with the proposal to organise a subsidiary farm, we needed to consult people acquainted with agriculture. Anyway, I am happy to present to you three instructors from specialised educational institutions. They will be asking you questions, and after that we shall decide who among you may be entrusted with a plot of land."

Nikolai Ivanovich introduced each of three instructors in turn and invited them to put questions to the gathering. The first to ask a question was an elderly instructor from the agricultural college, seated at the right of the stage:

"Who among you, sirs, can tell me what time of year tomato seeds should be planted for the propagation of seedlings? When should the seedlings be transplanted in the ground? And if you're familiar with the term *singling out*, tell me then, please, what signs indicate the need to use it?"

He's got 'em on the run now! thought Nikolai Ivanovich. *A bunch of questions all together in one. I bet even my wife, who's a veteran dachnik, couldn't even handle those from memory. She always checks in the books before planting anything. And look how quiet everybody is — not a stir.*

The silence in the hall disturbed Nikolai Ivanovich. He secretly hoped that the project would actually come to fruition. The only reason he was being so picky about it was not that he wanted to reject it but because he wanted to eliminate any flaws or defects in advance. The silence in the hall indicated that the project was being treated as less than serious by the participants most involved, which augured poorly for its chances of success.

Come on, now! he agonised. *Not a single answer? Isn't there at least one country lad out there? Though, in the country, it's more often the women than the men who do the vegetable planting.*

To somehow compensate for the awkward pause, Nikolai Ivanovich stood up from the table and said in a severe tone:

"What's up, lads? Didn't you get the question?"

"We got it," replied a young prisoner seated in the front row.

"Well, if you got it, then answer the question."

"Who do you want to answer? You haven't called anyone to come to the chalkboard."

"What d'you mean *who*? What *chalkboard*? If anyone knows the answer, put up your hand."

Instantly all two hundred prisoners present raised their hand.

The examining instructors, who had been conversing amongst themselves, at once fell silent. Nikolai Ivanovich was overcome with mixed feelings. On the one hand he felt a sense of pride in his charges, as well as a renewed hope that the project might indeed come to fruition. On the other hand — a sense of alarm over whether any of the two hundred who had raised their hand could give a satisfactory response to the question.

“How about *you* answering?” He gestured to the talkative young prisoner sitting in the front row.

The young man got to his feet. Stroking his bald head with a tattooed hand, he began to talk quickly and volubly:

“The time for starting tomato seedlings will not be the same each year. It all depends on the onset of reliable frost-free weather, which, of course, varies from year to year. If we take into account the need to plant the seedlings in the ground before they bloom, along with the period of maturation, we can calculate the time the seeds should be planted for propagation under greenhouse conditions or on a window-sill.”

“That will do, young man,” said the college instructor, interrupting the young prisoner’s discourse. “Put up your hand, whoever can continue.”

Again two hundred hands were thrust in the air. The instructor gestured to an elderly prisoner, by all appearances an old-time criminal with a gold filling in his mouth. The old fellow quickly rose to his feet, and began speaking in sedate tones:

“They need good regular soil, not some kind of useless crap. You need to put in some worm-processed humus, or peat-moss. But you shouldn’t plant seeds directly into *pure* peat moss like that. They quickly get used to the peat, then when they’re put into the garden they’ll be knocked for a loop — it’ll be too different for them. So you need to take the peat and mix it with just a bit of sand, using soil from the garden to dilute it at least by half. And you have to warm up their little earth-nest for them — say, up to about 25 degrees³ — before sticking the seeds in the earth.”

“That will do,” the instructor interrupted. “Basically you explained everything correctly. Next one continue,” and he pointed to a decent-looking, bespectacled prisoner in the third row. “So, your colleague left off saying: before planting tomato-seeds in the prepared soil, you have to... What do you have to do?”

The prisoner rose to his feet, straightened his spectacles and continued:

“Before planting the seeds in the soil you have prepared for them, you must put them in your mouth and hold them in the saliva under your tongue for at least nine minutes.”⁴

The examiners seated at the table, as well as the warden, were shocked by this amazing declaration, and stared at the bespectacled prisoner. After a brief pause one of the institute instructors asked again:

“Do you mean to say that before planting in the soil it should be moistened in water?”

“Never in water, certainly not in chlorinated or boiled water, where all the vital bacteria are destroyed. It must be moistened in one’s own saliva, to infuse it with information about one’s self. After it has been in a Man’s mouth, after being in his saliva at a temperature of 36 degrees⁵ (i.e., normal body temperature) for nine minutes, the seed will awaken from its dormancy and know right off what it is to

³The Celsius (Centigrade) scale common throughout Russia, Europe and Canada, is used throughout the Ringing Cedars Series. 25° C = 77° F.

⁴See the section entitled “The seed as physician” in Book 1, Chapter 11: “Advice from Anastasia”.

⁵36° C = 96.8° F.

do, and for whom it is to bear fruit. If a Man is suffering from any ailments or abnormalities, the seed will try to bear fruit to remove such abnormalities.”

The three instructors held an impromptu discussion amongst themselves, then turned to Nikolai Ivanovich. The college instructor queried:

“Who taught your charges — what institution did you invite specialists from to teach them?”

Even days later the warden still couldn’t figure out how he could have tripped up on answering this question. He responded this way:

“I don’t really remember where they were from. I wasn’t involved with that aspect, but I know they came from Moscow. A high-profile professor came.”

The prisoners in the auditorium caught on to the warden’s fib at once. They realised he was trying to protect them, not letting the latest responder be made fun of by the examiners, and, silently and gratefully, they in turn extended their support. The young prisoner in the front row (who had been the first to respond to the question) added:

“We thought he wasn’t just a professor, but an academician.⁶ And he knows a lot about the Siberian taiga, about life in general.”

“That’s right,” added the prisoner sitting beside him, “he’s a real clever chap, a super scholar.”

From various corners of the hall could be heard rumblings of approbation of the professor from Moscow, whom none of them had ever seen in the first place.

The second institute instructor, who had not spoken up to now, all at once began talking, trying to sound imposing:

“Yes, colleagues, I seem to remember seeing this theory somewhere myself, although I can’t remember where it was. Science today is moving in this direction. I find something intriguing in this — 36 degrees, actual human saliva permeated with all different kinds of vital bacteria... There’s definitely something to this.”

“Yes, yes. I seem to recall it too,” the college instructor echoed thoughtfully and in an equally grandiose manner, giving the impression that he too had heard something. “This is one of the new tendencies in vegetable-growing. Theoretically, of course, it is scientifically grounded, but we shall have to see how it works in practice.”

The prisoners seated in the hall gave fluent responses to a whole series of questions on agrotechnology. Their answers were not always of the standard variety. But the invited examiners were no longer in a hurry to offer counter-arguments. Quite the contrary, they listened with great interest.

While the assistant warden went to see off the instructors, Nikolai Ivanovich sat silently at the table in front of the hushed auditorium. A deathly silence hung over the hall as he leafed through the contents of the green folder. Then the warden raised his head, surveyed the whole auditorium and began to say:

“I can tell you this, lads. I still don’t have a complete understanding of what you’re proposing. No, not completely. So I’ve decided... In any case, I don’t know what will come of it. I’m going to try to push it through with the central administration.”

The hushed auditorium, as though on command, suddenly rose to its feet and erupted in spontaneous applause. Taken completely by surprise at the reaction, Nikolai Ivanovich rose to his feet as well. Overcome by an inexplicable embarrassment, he felt a pleasant and joyful sensation in his heart. But he managed to put on his best poker face befitting his status as a no-nonsense warden, and said:

⁶*academician* — a member of the Russian Academy of Sciences (a very high rank indeed).

“What’s all this noise about? Take your seats!” But even as he spoke he could feel the inappropriateness of excessive severity in the given context, and added: “We’ll still have to invite the professor from Moscow, all the same!”

Upon receiving Nikolai Ivanovich, the head of the Correctional Facilities Central Administration, General Pososhkov, got down to business right off:

“It’s not just you. Others, too, have been advised to upgrade their facilities, some just by five or ten places, some by as much as a hundred and fifty. You should be ready to accept an additional contingent of prisoners within a year. They all say it’s a challenge, unrealistic, and so our prisons are overcrowded. What would you have me do? Here I’ve got an order from the Justice Minister to make room for an additional six thousand prisoners. But you’ve given me cheer, Nikolai Ivanovich. I heard you say you’ll be ready to receive your share and right on time.”

“Yes, I’ll be ready. Only there have to be some modifications to the project, as I outlined in my report.”

“I know, I know. I read it. Only not everything’s clear to me in your report. You want to get involved in agriculture. That’s great! Assigning a separate plot to each prisoner — who’s stopping you? What makes you think you need my approval on this? But the notion of building a separate cell on each plot, now that *does* sound rather strange — it’s unreasonable. Go build one or two barracks. They can march to work each morning under guard. Less expensive. You’ll get no additional financing for individual cells.”

“But I’m not asking for any additional financing.”

“What *are* you asking for, then?”

“I just need you to approve the overall plan for individual cells on each plot.”

“And where’s the money going to come from to build these units?”

“From sponsors’ subsidies.”

“You must have some pretty eccentric sponsors... Look, okay then, I don’t have time to go into it. I’m going to write on your proposal: ‘Review and complete’ — but I’ll ring them up myself and tell them they should review and complete it with due process — no delay. Is that it?”

“There’s just one minor problem...”

“What problem?”

“I don’t have any land I can use for a subsidiary farm.”

“So, go see the governor. Ask him.”

“I spoke with his deputy. They’re considering, but that’s all they’re doing at the moment.”

“Okay, I’ll do what I can. I’ll ring him up... That’s it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“So, you can proceed. All the best.”

* * *

Nikolai Ivanovich’s facility obtained the land — 200 hectares — by the autumn. The land was in an isolated area, far from the nearest population point. They managed to truck in the barbed wire and five-metre-tall posts required to construct the enclosure before the seasonal rains washed out the road. Nikolai

Ivanovich realised that if the enclosure wasn't ready by the autumn, there was no way they could start cultivating the land on the plots the following spring. But how to get the posts into place, if even the back country road stopped two kilometres short of the allotted area? They wouldn't be able to get either the manpower or the equipment they needed for drilling the post-holes to the designated site.

When the prisoners learnt about the problem, they put forward a proposal to the warden: they would dig the post-holes by hand, and cross the two-kilometre stretch from the end of the road to the construction site on foot, under guard.

Every day, even under the cold autumn rain, a convoy of fifty prisoners marched out to the site, wearing homemade oilskins they had glued together from plastic sheeting. There had actually been even more volunteers, but because of a shortage of guards only fifty could be accommodated at a time. The future land-holders gave their all to their work. By the first frost all the fenceposts had been set up and connected by barbed wire, and the watch-towers erected. Back at the cellblock they constructed a log cabin for the guard at the controlled-entry point and put it in place, too.

The order was also submitted that autumn for the construction of the huts — individual cells for the prisoners to live in, at a cost of 30,000 roubles each. But there was no money left to pay for these. The prisoners set about raising the money where they could. Some had savings stored up from before their incarceration, others were helped by relatives, but there were a few who found it impossible to raise such a sum from any source.

They sent a memo to the warden letting him know of their willingness to live in tents. But this was against regulations, and they were turned down.

One hundred and eighty huts were transported to the new security zone over the winter road and set up on the piles driven in the autumn. And early in the spring one hundred and eighty prisoners were installed in these primitive huts with bars on the windows.

One fine spring day the warden stood in one of the watch-towers and surveyed the extraordinary scene before him. On the two hundred hectares of barbed-wire enclosure a hundred and eighty plots had been delineated, divided from each other by stakes and brushwood, with the occasional border marked by a length of stretched wire.

Those are the wealthy ones, decided the warden. Their relatives must have sent them money not just to build their cell, but for their border markings too.

Lanes and foot-paths ran between the plots, with a common space for meetings at the centre. In some of the low-lying areas the snow hadn't completely melted. But on the little hills the first green blades of grass were already showing. On almost every plot the warden could make out the dark outlines of isolated human figures — figures which appeared faceless and identical in their warm prison jackets, cloth caps with ear-flaps, and rough, canvas-topped boots.

What could these isolated, faceless figures possibly create on this empty ground? Why weren't they staying in their cells? The warden peered through his field-glasses and focused in on one of them. It turned out to be Prisoner Khodakov, thrusting his spade into ground, which was still partly frozen as he dug another hole. Shifting his field-glasses around, Nikolai Ivanovich counted nineteen holes already dug in the half-frozen ground around the perimeter of Khodakov's plot.

All over the zone, figures in dark jackets were doing exactly the same thing — digging holes around the perimeter of their plots.

“Why so many holes?” Nikolai Ivanovich wondered aloud.

“They’re for the saplings and bushes which will grow into a green hedge surrounding each plot,” the guard explained.

“I see. Couldn’t they wait a week or two until the ground is thawed and the digging will be easier?”

“I told them as much, but they don’t want to wait. They’re afraid they won’t get it all in on time. Each one has four hundred metres of hedge to plant — that’s no light undertaking. And once the ground thaws out, they’ll have to start work on their vegetable beds.”

The warden spent quite a while longer observing the zeal and dexterity each of his charges displayed as they worked, and he mused:

There must be some kind of cosmic link between the soul of a Man and the soul of the Earth. If that link is there, Man is in harmony with the planet. If it isn’t, then there’s no harmony. Corruption sets in, and crime goes up.

Of course, that book, Anastasia, must be quite exceptional. All the cons have read it, and something inexplicable has erupted in their hearts. It’s happened with me too — I read it and now I’ve started looking at life differently. Of course this book is playing its part — prisoners all over the country are reading it. But the book’s strength is really in how it brings out Man’s relationship with the Earth. In other words, that relationship is primary, and one should never attempt to sever it. And all this talk about high morals and spirituality is nothing but idle chatter without this mysterious relationship which is not yet fully comprehended!

* * *

By autumn all the plots in the ‘new zone’, as the prisoners themselves called it, were framed by still only partly-grown saplings of apple trees, pear-trees, rowans, birches and all sorts of plantings, which with their leaves decked out in their multi-coloured autumnal hues, created a most pleasing picture to the eye. Approximately fifteen hundred to two thousand square metres of each hectare had been planted with forest saplings. Even by that very first autumn the view from the watch-towers over the two hundred hectares below gave a distinctly different and positive impression compared to the desert-like black earth that could be seen everywhere the preceding spring. It was abundantly clear that the whole enclosure was being transformed into an exceptional oasis of green.

All summer long the new zone provided the prison cafeteria with fresh greens, then cucumbers, tomatoes and beets.

In the fall each prisoner offered up — from the plot of land entrusted to him — five sacks of potatoes, along with several dozen jars of salted and canned cucumbers and tomatoes. The prison commissary was provided with a whole winter’s supply of beets, carrots, horseradish and other vegetables.

An unusual scene took place in the autumn at the new zone’s controlled-entry point. In contrast to all other prison facilities in the world, where foodstuffs and other treats would be passed to the prisoners from outside, in this new zone they were moving in the opposite direction.

The soldiers handed out jars of preserved vegetables to the prisoners’ relatives. Many had come by car and left with a wealth of produce in their baggage compartments.

Prisoners who did not have any relatives living close by sold their part of the harvest, through the soldiers, to food wholesalers at a handsome profit.

Nobody came to see Prisoner Khodakov, however. He did not have any relatives. He had grown up in an orphanage, and asked to have his portion of the harvest sent to the nearest children's home.

Nikolai Ivanovich earned the administration's gratitude for a successful carrying out of their order. He was the only warden able to accept a new contingent of one hundred and eighty prisoners without a worsening of holding conditions for the remainder.

The past year had been the busiest one for Nikolai Ivanovich in all his twenty years of service. Apart from his usual duties, he was also responsible for 'prying' seeds or saplings for the new zone out of whatever source he could. But he felt a shiver of delight every time he saw the old prison *Zil*⁷ pull up, loaded to the gills with young saplings.

* * *

Five more years went by. Then on one fine July day a helicopter appeared and began to circle over the new zone. Nikolai Ivanovich stood at the controlled-entry point and watched the helicopter fly over. He knew that on board were General Pososhkov and members of a committee despatched by the Ministry of Justice. Perhaps someone had sent in a complaint about the warden, or it might have been simply rumours, but in any case word had spread about a 'peculiar' prisoner-holding régime.

After the helicopter landed, the committee members, all highly-placed officials, stepped out onto the open space in front of the entry point. But Nikolai Ivanovich kept standing and thinking only about the zone's security perimeter:

Yes, it is clear that I shall be charged with a violation of regulations here. Why did I ever give permission for these climbing perennials to be planted around the security perimeter? They've already climbed up three metres, the full height of the barbed wire and formed a hedge, so that the wire can't even be seen behind all the different flowers.

The barbed wire, you see, they didn't find aesthetically pleasing. They even put in climbing plants and flowers around the watch-towers, which have wound their way right up to the guards' look-out. Now the whole thing doesn't even look like a security zone any more, more like some sort of a Paradise oasis amidst fields overgrown with tall grasses.

"Here, if you please, is the first violation, already quite evident," said the general representing the Ministry. "What kind of security perimeter have you got here? Anyone who wants to, can climb over a barrier like that, all wound around with vines," the general went on, turning to Pososhkov, the administration chief. "Any soldier will tell you that. Am I right?" The Ministry representative addressed the lieutenant on duty at the entry point.

"Permission to answer, General, sir!" the duty officer responded, standing to attention at his post.

"Answer when you're asked a question! Is there any violation of regulations here?"

"Negative, sir, General, sir! In this instance you are simply looking at a tactical improvement of the security perimeter of the prisoner-holding zone."

⁷*Zil* (pron. *ZEAL*)— a standard lorry or truck produced by the major Russian (Soviet) automobile factory known as *Zavod imeni Likhacheva* (acronym: *ZIL*) in the city of Nizhny Novgorod on the Volga river, which has been operating under one name or another since 1916. From 1927 until his death in 1956, it was run by Ivan Alekseevich Likhachev, when it was renamed in his honour. The factory also produces passenger cars (marketed under the *Volga* brand) and luxury limousines ('*Chaika*') which during the Soviet period were the motorcars of choice for higher-placed government officials.

“Wha... what’s that?” one of the Ministry committee members was taken aback. “What kind of tactical improvement are you talking about? What kind of drivel is that?”

All the committee members stopped beside the lieutenant standing at attention.

Oh, that jokester, mused Nikolai Ivanovich, feeling ultimately let down — *that Lieutenant Prokhorov again with his endless jokes. If only he could control himself in front of the committee! Now for certain they’ll never pardon this ridicule. And he just stands there at attention without so much as a blush.*

The lieutenant began talking, spitting out his words:

“Permission to answer the question on improvement, sir!”

“Answer, if you can,” ordered the general from the Ministry. “By ‘tactical improvement’, do you mean your flowers?”

“Exactly, sir. If any criminal tries to escape by climbing over the barbed wire intertwined with flowers, he won’t get very far.”

“Why is that?” asked the general in astonishment.

“In the process of climbing over the perimeter fence intertwined with fragrant flowers, his whole body will be infused with their scent, which means that even an inexperienced dog will be able to easily track him down and bring him back.”

“So, he’ll be infused!” The general broke into a loud guffaw and all the committee members joined in. “And the dog will follow the scent of the flowers! Pretty nifty, Lieutenant. Imaginative. And how many escapees have your dogs brought back that way?” asked the general through his laughter.

“Not a single one,” replied the lieutenant, and continued in all seriousness: “Since the criminals realise the futility of any attempt at climbing the fence, there hasn’t been a single escape attempt in the past five years.”

The committee members felt even more exhilarated by the lieutenant’s serious look and his declaration.

“D’you mean to say that there has not been a single attempted escape from this security zone in the past five years?” the committee head asked the administration chief.

“That’s right, not a single one,” replied Pososhkov.

The committee members, clearly pleased by the lieutenant’s sharp-witted responses, put the following question to him:

“Tell us, Lieutenant, if no criminals even attempt to escape from this security zone, then why the armed soldiers in the watch-towers?”

“To protect the zone from the outside world,” replied the lieutenant.

“What does that mean — ‘to protect from the outside world’? Does anyone try to break *in* to the zone?”

“Affirmative, sir!” the lieutenant responded. “Many of the prisoners’ wives have declared their wish to live with their husbands in their cells. Some of them have requested permission to spend the summer in the cells along with their children. But our strict warden’s strict enforcement of regulations won’t permit any such lawlessness. So a few unconscientious wives took it upon themselves to try either getting through the hedge or tunnelling underneath. But all such brazen attempts have been thwarted by the zone’s excellent security force.”

Uncertain as to whether the lieutenant was joking or speaking seriously, the committee chair enquired of Nikolai Ivanovich:

“Have there really been instances like this?”

“Affirmative,” replied Nikolai Ivanovich. “Two such attempts have been thwarted. I received ninety-six applications from prisoners’ wives wishing to spend the summer with their children on their husbands’ plots. But apart from the conjugal meetings provided for in the regulations, nothing like this can be permitted.”

“I wonder what it is that attracts them to the security zone, especially with the children?” mused the committee chair aloud, adding: “In any case, colleagues, let us go in and take a look for ourselves.”

“Open the gates!” Nikolai Ivanovich ordered the lieutenant.

The wooden gates, decorated with traditional Russian carvings, quickly opened up, and the committee members entered the security zone. They had hardly gone a few paces when they all at once spontaneously stopped.

Seen through the helicopter’s viewports, the zone had had the appearance of a beautiful green oasis. But here on the ground it was not only the delightful foot-paths of mowed grass, not only the multicoloured living fences around the perimeter, that struck the committee members. Accustomed to the odours of their offices and city streets, they were now gracefully enveloped by the delicate fragrances of summer plants and flowers. The silence was broken only by the singing of birds and the humming of insects — sounds which by no means irritated, but soothed people’s ears.

“We should visit one of the plots,” said the committee chair, for some reason in a hushed tone, as though afraid of disturbing the general atmosphere.

The prominent officials walked up the pathway of the first plot they came to, heading for the cell-hut. The little hut was actually surrounded by a metal cage, though this was scarcely visible unless one examined it at close range. From a distance it looked like a little green hillock. Wound around with various vines and surrounded by flower beds, it blended in most harmoniously with the surrounding space.

At the entrance to the hut stood a man in a white T-shirt, his back to the approaching visitors. The prisoner was oiling a metal lock bolt, energetically trying to slide it back and forth. This was something of a challenge, and the prisoner was so absorbed in the task that it was a while before he became aware of his visitors.

“Hello, Kharlamych!”⁸ Nikolai Ivanovich greeted him. “Make our guests feel at home, introduce yourself.”

Kharlamych quickly turned about. After momentarily losing his bearings upon seeing visitors, he quickly regained his composure and introduced himself:

“Prisoner Kharlamych, sentenced according to Article 102 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation to twelve years. Served six years in the cellblock, five years now in the new zone.”

“And what have you been doing here with your door?” asked the committee chair.

“I’ve been oiling the exterior bolt, Chairman, sir! It’s started sticking quite a bit, the metal they produce today’s not very good quality, it rusts quickly.”

The committee chair went over to the door leading into the cell, closed it and tried shoving the bolt into position. It didn’t budge on the first attempt, but he finally got it to work. Then he turned, and, with a meaningful glance to the administration chief Pososhkov, declared:

“So, you claim you’re following all the regulations for prisoner-holding to the letter. Does that mean that after completion of their workday they’re all locked up in their cells?”

⁸*Kharlamych* (pron. *har-LA-mitch*) — a patronymic derived from the prisoner’s father’s name *Kharlam*. The use of the patronymic alone here indicates the highly informal relationship that has developed between the warden and his charges.

The administration chief was silent. Everyone realised that the metal bolt had rusted and was hard to budge for the simple reason that it had not been used for a long time.

Prisoner Kharlamyich realised that he had let his superiors down. And thoughts began running through his head:

I should have fixed this damn bolt a long time ago. How can I explain to these people that this lock is completely unnecessary? Nobody here would even think of leaving the zone, of running away from his land. To what purpose? Where would they go?

As for Kharlamyich, here was his native space, here was his Motherland. It was here that he was greeted every morning by the singing of the birds and the waving of the branches of trees he himself had planted. He had even been raising a little goat, which he had named Nikita, along with a dozen laying hens, and had a couple of beehives. Others had their own homesteads, setting them up just a little differently, but for each one it was his own homestead, on his own piece of land. And here he had gone and let down his warden with this damn bolt!

Kharlamyich was really upset. He began talking quickly and excitedly.

“I’m the world’s worst son-of-a-bitch when it comes to this bolt, Chairman, sir! And I have no excuse if it should reflect badly on my buddies. Only I want you understand — let me have one last word here. Let me... Let me tell you: my whole life has changed. Not even ‘changed’ — in fact, my life has just begun in this place. I’m free here. Out there, outside the gates — there’s no freedom there — indeed, that’s where all hell breaks loose. The soldiers up there in the watch-towers — they’re like angels to us. We pray that they don’t let any scum in here...”

The prisoner’s voice with its heart-wrenching emotion and the content of what he had to say worked its own unique effect on the people standing by. All at once one of the committee members, a woman deputy from the State Duma, suddenly burst out:

“What’s all the fuss over this measly bolt? Don’t you see it rained last night? The bolt’s started shrivelling.”

The committee chair glanced at the metal bolt, then at the woman, and burst out laughing.

“Shrivelling, you say? Why didn’t I think of that before? It did rain, after all, and the bolt began to shrivel, and it rusted... And up in the towers — those are angels, you say?”

“Angels,” Kharlamyich echoed.

“Tell me, when is your time up?”

“In eleven months and seven days.”

“How do you propose to live after that?”

“I’ve applied to have my sentence extended...”

“What? How could it be extended? Why?”

“Cause out there there’s no freedom. There’s no order in that kind of freedom. There’s no freedom without land.”

“And who’s stopping you from going free, getting a piece of land and creating the same kind of homestead that you have here, only as a free man? You could get yourself a family!”

“You know, Chairman, sir, that’s something I’ll never understand. Who’s stopping us here in Russia from giving each Russian a hectare of land? I’ll never understand. Does Russian land belong to Russians or not?”

“Right now, according to the law adopted by the State Duma, everyone has the right to buy land,” observed the woman deputy.

“And what if I don’t have the money even to buy a single hectare of land? Does that mean I have no Motherland? That’s the way it looks — I don’t have it and never will have. But if Russia is my Motherland, just who am I supposed to buy it from? It turns out somebody’s seized my Motherland for themselves — the whole country, down to a single hectare — and is now demanding a ransom from every last Russian! There’s some monkey business going on here. Beyond the law and beyond our understanding.

“You, Chairman, sir,” Kharlamych addressed the committee chair, “I see by your stripes that you’re a general. So, liberate our Motherland from whoever seized it and is demanding a ransom. Or are you too going to be paying a ransom for your own little piece of the Motherland?”

“Prisoner Kharlamich, cease and desist!” Nikolai Ivanovich intervened. He could see the scar on the war-wounded general’s cheek turning purple, and his fists clenching. The general stepped up to the prisoner. They stood staring each other in the eye, without a word between them. Then the general quietly said:

“Show me around your homestead, Russian citizen,” and added even more quietly, almost to himself: “your piece of the Motherland behind barbed wire.”

Kharlamych showed the committee members around his young garden, with its budding fruit on the branches. He treated them to currants and raspberries. He showed them the tomato beds, along with the more than 200 square metres he had planted with cucumbers. He showed them the pond he had dug himself with a spade. Standing beside the pond was a neatly arranged row of barrels.

“Kharlamych has a particular know-how here,” Nikolai Ivanovich explained to the committee members, pointing to the barrels. “He salts away a hundred fifty-litre barrels of cucumbers every year. He’s developed a superior, first-rate pickling method. And he’s invented an original preservation system. First he fills each barrel with cucumbers and brine, then he caulks them and stores them in the pond, underwater. They’ll keep that way until the spring. As soon as the restaurant wholesalers arrive from Moscow, Kharlamych chops a hole in the ice and drags a barrel over to the entry point. We sell them at five hundred roubles a barrel. Kharlamych gets 250, and the rest goes to the prison coffers.”

“And how much does each enterprise make annually for your facility?” enquired one of the committee members.

“On average, around a hundred thousand roubles a year,” responded Nikolai Ivanovich. “Though, according to contract, half of it goes to the workers on the plots.”

“A hundred thousand?” the committee member was astonished. “And you’ve got here a hundred and eighty hectares all told. That means you have a net profit of ninety million a year from them?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“And the prisoners each make fifty thousand a year?”

“Yes, that’s how it works out.”

“In the whole country we’ve got over a million citizens being held in incarceration. What if we switched them all over to such a system? What a tremendous source of income for the country! Plus the number of criminals, judging from what we can see, would significantly decrease.”

“Switch over... all of them?” another committee member broke into the conversation. “But we’re facing quite a different question here: this zone may even be closed down. Why were we brought here anyway? To find out what’s really happening. There’s something funny going on here — prisoners living in better conditions than people at liberty. And these prisoners, no matter how you put it, are criminals. Anyway, what are you going to do, Nikolai Ivanovich, when these people’s terms are up?”

The warden answered without hesitation:

“If I had my way, I would let every last one of them look after their own plot. I’d take down the barbed wire and move it somewhere else — start setting up a new zone.”

In their report to the Ministry of Justice the committee members reported that they found no violations of regulations on prisoner-holding.

“What about these rumours that the prisoners are living in better conditions than many free citizens?” asked the Minister.

“Then it is the lives of our free citizens that have to be improved,” the committee chair observed. “We need to give people land. Not lip-service, but in actual fact.”

“But that’s not within our jurisdiction,” said the Minister, dismissing the proposal. “Let’s get right to the essentials.”

“In terms of essentials, it comes down to this: we need to replicate this experience in all the facilities under our jurisdiction,” the committee chair stated firmly.

“I second that,” affirmed the woman deputy, adding: “and I fully intend to introduce a bill in the Duma to grant every Russian family a hectare of land for lifetime use, whereon to establish their own kin’s domain.”

* * *

The Duma passed the law. At one swoop millions of Russian families began planting gardens and little forests on their own family lands. And Russia flourished...

In what year did this happen?... What — it hasn’t happened yet? Why not? Who’s stopping us? Who is preventing Russia from flourishing?

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