The name Svirko should be very well known to anyone who was on “Kolyma” in the 1930’s. He was a young Soviet engineer and geologist who, after completing his training at the institute in Moscow in 1932, went to “Kolyma” as a volunteer to work in his profession. He had no family, no close friends, he lived alone, and on “Kolyma” the pay was good. Svirko went after the “long ruble,” as the saying goes. He didn’t work long as a geologist however. His sharp wits soon whispered to him that on “Kolyma” one could work less, get more and live better. Svirko soon accustomed himself to the atmosphere of the Soviet concentration camps. He quickly learned the nature and the tastes of the mighty Chekist Berzin, unlimited ruler of “Kolyma,” a favorite of Stalin himself. Svirko managed to get close to Berzin, to please him and to make a favorable impression on him. Very soon after his arrival on “Kolyma” Svirko was made chief of the Urutukan division of the camp, located in the wild, silent taiga, three hundred and fifty kilometers from the administrative
center at Magadan. He had fifty to sixty thousand prisoners at his complete disposal. With these forces he mined gold, and built the road which was to cut through the loneliness of the taiga for thousands of kilometers in the direction of Yakutsk.

Tempo! Tempo! Tempo! Fulfill the production and construction plans at all cost! Overfulfill the plans! Disregard the cost, even if it be the lives of thousands of prisoner-slaves. Raise the norms! Raise them again! And so on and on, without end. The men, the slaves, perished from labor beyond their strength, from malnutrition, from the cold, but the plans were fulfilled. The building of socialism marched on at full speed. Communism triumphed.

To replace those who perished in the taiga more and more thousands of prisoners were sent to Svirko. As far as the supply of worker forces were concerned, there was no problem. "Our human resources are unlimited," Stalin had said. His words were fully confirmed on Kolyma." Svirko quickly assumed the role of lord and master of all. In the course of two years he achieved for himself a magnificent production record, and what was even more important, Berzin's favor. He enjoyed Berzin's complete confidence, became his favorite. In Berzin's support lay Svirko's enormous power.

Svirko accustomed himself not only to the role of administrator, but also to that of grand inquisitor over the prisoners. The passion of the sadist, latent in his nature, burst forth suddenly. He became a cruel and cunning beast. In justification of his conduct, he liked to refer to himself as a Chekist. "We Chekists," he would say, "must stop at nothing in the building of Communism! We must be merciless in the process of erecting our Communist state, and in the strengthening of our great Communist Party!"

Torturing human beings was a necessity of life for Svirko, and he did it with passion, with irrepressible delight. Berzin forgave him everything he did out there in the taiga. Or perhaps it would be more proper to say that he simply paid no attention to anything Svirko did, except to his successful fulfillment of the production plans.

Many of the prisoners committed to Svirko's charge experienced the terrible force of his passion. He liked to interrogate personally those who might be guilty of infractions of the camp rules, although this was completely outside the purview of his responsibilities, since he had a special operative-Chekist department in his organization for this purpose. For the prisoners, Svirko's interrogations were more dreaded than those of the professional Chekists who, as everyone knows, are not particularly known for their gentleness. Frequently, when prisoners were stubborn at interrogations and would not confess, the Chekist interrogators would frighten them with the threat that Svirko himself would call them up for a personal interview. Such a threat would usually be sufficient to make the prisoners tell all they knew, and furthermore, when the interrogators demanded it, to take upon themselves the blame for deeds which they had never committed and concerning which they had not the slightest knowledge. All the consequences which could arise as a result of such confessions—trial by court, increase of prison term, and even the firing squad—were less terrible for them than the prospect of ending up at an interrogation with the chief of the camp division, that enthusiast of socialist construction, that engineer-geologist, young Communist Party member and amateur-Chekist, Svirko.

Usually Svirko questioned prisoners alone, behind closed doors, in the office which he had in his large bachelor apartment. After these interrogations the prison-
ers would be led out or carried out on stretchers, bloody, crippled, often with broken bones and knocked out teeth. During these interrogations shrieks could be heard from Svirko’s house, and groans, and the sound of falling bodies, and shots. He did not kill his victims at interrogations, but sometimes for its terrorizing effect he would fire pistol shots over the head of the person being questioned, or would shoot at nonvital parts of the body. When he felt stronger measures to be necessary, he would plunge a knife, a fork or some other sharp instrument into the body of his victim. He would beat prisoners in the face with his fist, with a stick, or with a lash. Into the open wounds he would throw a handful of salt. He would rage and storm and then, right in the midst of this, would go over into a mood of happy exhilaration.

Svirko liked to drench a prisoner with water and then take him outside where the temperature was forty degrees below zero, and force him to walk around. He himself would dress in a warm fox fur coat, a furry squirrel cap, buckskin boots with fur above the knee and warm gloves and would walk along beside his victim until the latter was no longer able to move in his frozen clothing. Then Svirko would stop, light up a cigarette and stand looking at this living ice-block, laughing at the poor wretch’s misery. At such times he liked to display his curiosity in a joking manner, “Well, how are you now, my dear fellow? Cold?” he would ask. “Why are you standing still? Move about! Get warm! Tell me, how do you feel now?” He would say all this slowly, with a quiet, sympathetic tone of voice, with a nuance of derision. When this bored him, he would order the frozen man to be carried into his office, and the interrogation would continue.

After each interrogation Svirko would call a recess until the following evening. During this recess the prisoner would be put back in the cement-walled cold-cell of the prison, where he would usually fall to the floor in a state of exhaustion. Many did not survive these recesses, and died in the cell. They were written off the books as having died of “natural causes.” Nobody concerned himself as to the cause of their death.

Svirko acquired fame as a pitiless, blood-thirsty beast. The mention of his name was enough to bring terror to the prisoners. His own administrative organization trembled before him. The soldiers and officers of the guard also feared him. Everybody knew that he was Berzin’s favorite, which was the same as saying, all-powerful. Such a man was Svirko.

In this manner Svirko, establishing an arbitrary regime, passed himself off with complete impunity as a true and devoted son of the Party, a Chekist irreconcilably ruthless toward its enemies, an organizer and a leader. He founded for himself on “Kolyma” a new career, and set his eyes on the “brilliant future,” counting on Berzin’s continued favor.

In the Urutukan division of the camp, where Svirko was in charge, there was among the prisoners a former Soviet engineer by the name of Voskoboinikov, who had been sentenced for counter-revolutionary activity. For some reason, Svirko had accused Voskoboinikov of having engaged in sabotage, of obstructing the production plans, and inciting a rebellion of the prisoners against the camp discipline, and against the administration, and against Svirko himself. He accused Voskoboinikov of having plotted a revolt of the prisoners. He ordered him arrested. When the inquiry had been concluded, the charge against Voskoboinikov was sustained, and sent back to the camp center at
Magadan for review at a special session of the court there.

Svirko, upon acquainting himself with the results of the inquiry, was still not satisfied. Voskoboinikov's sabotage had been established conclusively, as well as his agitation against the camp administration, but not one word had been said about the plotting of a revolt by the prisoners. Svirko wanted to make the matter reflect that he in his endeavors on behalf of the Party was constantly subject to danger from the prisoners, that plots were being organized against him, and that through his diligence alone he had averted a revolt. In short, it was the time-worn ruse for gaining recognition for the local command in the eyes of the high organs of state security, as well as commendations and, perhaps, decorations. Svirko decided to make good the "oversight" of the Chekist-investigator.

He ordered that Voskoboinikov be brought to him for a personal interrogation. During the course of three successive nights, Svirko interrogated Voskoboinikov in his apartment, beating the necessary confessions out of him. Voskoboinikov was left without teeth as a result of this interrogation; one eye was knocked out of his head. His collar bone was broken, and several ribs. In due course Voskoboinikov, covered with wounds, confessed to everything demanded of him, to Svirko's complete satisfaction, signed all the necessary protocols. After this Voskoboinikov was put back into his solitary confinement cell, and the results of the inquiry was sent off to Magadan. It was expected, naturally, that he would be sentenced to execution.

Svirko wrote a personal letter to Berzin, in which he described in detail all the difficulties and dangers which attended his post. After a few days an order came from Berzin that Voskoboinikov be delivered immediately to central headquarters in Magadan. The case was interesting to Berzin. He wanted to inflate the affair even further, in order to extract from it some personal benefit in his own report to Moscow. Berzin's request had to be fulfilled, but how? The fact of the matter was, there had been no conspiracy to revolt whatsoever; Voskoboinikov had made absolutely no attempt to assassinate Svirko. This could be embarrassing, if it were to become known in Magadan. Furthermore, how could the beaten, half-dead Voskoboinikov, with his broken bones, be delivered to Magadan for all to see?

That evening Svirko personally gave detailed instructions to the senior soldier of the escort guard, one Smirnov, in his private office. The next day, early in the morning, the mutilated and half-alive Voskoboinikov, wrapped up in a reindeer fur, was loaded into a sleigh pulled by two small shaggy Siberian horses. Alongside him rode two mounted guards, wearing skin coats. The party set off on the long road to Magadan.

A day passed, and a night, and another day. At evening on the second day, when it was already dark, the guards who had set out on the day before returned to the hamlet of Urutukan. On the sleigh still lay Voskoboinikov, wrapped in furs, just as on the morning before. He was dead. The soldiers left the horses on the edge of the village. Senior Guard Smirnov set off in the direction of Svirko's house. They buried Voskoboinikov the same day. The guards had the following story to relate concerning what had happened.

Toward evening of the first day they decided to pass the night in the first house they might find along the way. It was already getting toward evening, when they came upon a small house standing alone. They stopped, and both of the soldiers went in, to see what arrangements for sleeping could be made. They left Voskoboinikov in the sleigh. In a few minutes Soldier Smir-
nov came out of the house, but the sleigh and Voskoboinikov were no longer there. Then, in the distance, he saw Voskoboinikov standing up in the sleigh, speeding down the road, urging on the horses, trying to escape. Soldier Smirnov began to shout and to fire at the fleeing man. One of the shots hit him. The horses ran into a snowdrift and stopped. The other soldier ran out of the house at the sound of the shouts and the shooting. He saw only the horses standing in the snowdrift, and several paces away, lying stretched out on the road, lay Voskoboinikov, dead. Near him stood soldier Smirnov. The soldiers picked up the dead man and started back to Urutukan. This is what the soldiers had to say about what had happened.

Svirko sent a report to Berzin, and after describing in detail what had happened along the road, came to the following conclusion: “The escort guard was obliged to resort to arms in order to frustrate Voskoboinikov’s attempt to escape. This measure was fully justified by the circumstances.”

At the same time, through routine channels, he sent a report to Magadan to the commander of the operative-Chekist organization which had conducted the inquiry. Here also he drew the conclusion that the use of firearms was “fully justified by the circumstances.”

The chief of the operative-Chekist unit could not help but know in what condition Voskoboinikov had been when he was bundled off from Urutukan on the road to Magadan. He was an experienced Chekist however, and knew what his attitude should be under the circumstances. He closed his eyes to certain things which it was not good for him to see.

The commander of the local unit of the guard also could not help but know about all this. He was an officer still inexperienced in the conditions of concentration camp life, however, not sufficiently seasoned and not yet properly educated in the facts of life in Berzin’s “Kolyma.” He could not understand how the half-dead Voskoboinikov, bruised and wounded and with many broken bones, could have possibly attempted to escape. There was surely more here than met the eye; of this the commander had no doubt whatever. But why then did Private Smirnov shoot him? Why did the two soldiers corroborate each other in the fantastic tale that Voskoboinikov had been killed in an attempt to escape? The commander was lost in conjecture. He was completely unable to understand the matter.

He called in both of the soldiers and began to question them concerning details. The junior soldier was only able to relate what he had already said previously: “When I heard the shots I ran out of the house and saw . . .”

Soldier Smirnov repeated what he had already said several times before. The commander’s doubt increased and, closeting himself with Smirnov alone, he posed severe and pointed questions to him.

“Did you shoot Voskoboinikov?”

“Yes, during an attempt to escape.”

“How could Voskoboinikov attempt to escape, when he was barely alive?”

“I don’t know how he did it, but he tried to escape.”

“You’re hiding something! Voskoboinikov couldn’t have escaped. I know very well, and you know very well what condition Voskoboinikov was in. Tell me how it happened! If you lie to me any more I’ll have you arrested and sent to headquarters in Magadan. There they’ll interrogate you good and proper. I want the whole truth, and I want it right now!”

Soldier Smirnov lost his head, began to contradict his previous explanations, tried to disentangle himself, but he still avoided the truth. He finally became completely confused in his contradictions. At last he
said in a dogged tone, “It was the way I said in the first place. I don’t know anything more! Voskoboinikov tried to escape and I shot him.”

When private Smirnov left the commander it was completely dark. After he left the kaserne he carefully, stealthily headed for Svirko’s house, trying to avoid attracting attention.

Following his conversation with Smirnov the commander remained convinced that the soldier had intentionally killed Voskoboinikov. He was indignant. In his inexperience and naivety he began to write a report to the commander of the camp guard forces in Magadan, in which he explained everything he knew about the case, omitting no details.

Svirko’s report and that of the commander of the guard unit went to Magadan by the same express military courier, and only those who had written them knew of their contents.

On the next day Svirko summoned the commander of the guard unit and suggested pointedly to him that it would be well to terminate his investigation of the Voskoboinikov incident, and take no further measures. Life in the taiga continued on its way. Nobody spoke of what had happened. But the reports had been sent off, and they had been received in Magadan. Berzin, upon reading Svirko’s report, directed that the matter be dropped. However, the commander of the guard forces in Magadan, not yet knowing Berzin’s decision on this question, ordered that both soldiers be arrested and immediately delivered in Magadan to the guard forces headquarters.

When Svirko found out that the two soldiers were already under guard and on their way to Magadan in a truck that was going that way. Regardless of the late hour, the agitated Svirko ordered that an automobile be brought up. He set off for Magadan.

The commander of the guard, not without reason, became uneasy, and being unable to stand the suspense, decided to ride to central headquarters. Not having an automobile at his disposal, he ordered horses to be brought up, and without losing time also rode off to Magadan, hoping along the way to get a ride with some passing automobile.

The next morning Svirko was already closeted with Berzin in his office. Meanwhile the commander of the guard unit from Urutukan, muffled up his sheepskin coat, burning with impatience and vexation, slowly dragged along the road. He did not meet a single automobile along the way. The chief of the guard forces meanwhile was personally interrogating the soldier Smirnov in his headquarters, in the presence of a commissar.

**Smirnov was terrified** by the unexpected turn of events. He could not know that the highest authorities had caused his arrest and ordered him brought to the center. He imagined everything, right up to the very worst, that could be in store for him. But the main thing that made him uneasy was that he found himself without the supporting presence of his protector Svirko. Morally he was already prepared for complete capitulation before the high-ranking officers who were questioning him.

“Well now, tell us what happened with you and Voskoboinikov,” began the commander of the guard forces.

Soldier Smirnov was silent. He looked uneasily, first at the commander, and then at the commissar, hoping somehow from their faces to understand how much they
knew of what had actually happened. Lowering his eyes, he became reflective, and after a long silence, he began, timidly, stumbling over his words.

“Well you see, Comrade Commander, it was a bad business. I understand that. But I really don’t know—what can I do? It was a clumsy business. I know I can’t get off without a trial. Anyway, how can I prove my innocence now? They interrogated me in Urutukan, they put together a protocol. I signed it, and now I have to say something absolutely different. Now you want the real truth from me.

“I lost my head completely, Comrade Commander; I was confused. I’ll tell you the truth. I’ll tell you how it was, but I beg you to help me. Tell me what I should do. Stand behind me. I give you my word, I won’t hide anything from you—but save me! Who else can I turn to, except you?”

Smirnov hung his head and, covering his face with his hands, sat for a long time like this, silent and motionless.

The commander of the guard forces looked at his commissar significantly. The commissar nodded his head. This was more like it.

Presently Smirnov began again, in a quiet, timid voice, “Our chief Svirko noticed me a long time ago, and he always set me apart from the other soldiers. I don’t know why, but I seemed to please him. Possibly because of my size, my strength. Whenever he met me he would always smile at me and he never passed by without saying something nice, or maybe a joke. Sometimes he would stop, give me a cigarette, and ask me, ‘Well, what do you say, Big Boy, how’s the world treating you?’ When he needed a soldier to guard somebody he always called for me on the telephone. If I was on duty when he called, he would get mad and say, ‘Well, then send me any knucklehead you’ve got there.’ He didn’t like the guards much, but he was always good to me.

“When he was interrogating Voskoboinikov he called for me. One time he even ordered me to be taken off charge of quarters duty. I sat at his place for three nights out in the corridor while he was interrogating Voskoboinikov. From outside the door I heard Svirko beating him, and Voskoboinikov groaning and sometimes screaming. The last night I almost passed out. He stripped him, and then began to jab him with a stick that had a sharp metal point. I could hear it all from the talk that came through the door. I went up to the door and began to look through the keyhole. There I see Svirko jabbing him with the sharp end of the stick. Voskoboinikov is covering his face with his hands, blood is flowing, but he’s taking it, just groaning a little, and then suddenly he falls on the floor, and Svirko starts jabbing him as hard as he can, in the face, in the chest, in the belly . . . .

“I couldn’t look any more. I sat down on the floor by the door. I began to feel queer, started to throw up. I wanted to run away, but I was afraid. After a while Svirko calls me into his office. On the floor there is Voskoboinikov, running with blood. He’s lying there not moving. He’s breathing hard, and just moves his lips, and blood is coming out of his mouth. Svirko tells me, ‘Take this filthy thing and throw it in my cell,’—he has his own solitary cell in the prison—‘and then come back here.’

“I took Voskoboinikov and hoisted him up on on my shoulders. Svirko covered him with a canvas, and I carried him off in the dark to the prison. On sentry duty at the prison was the same soldier who later rode with me when we started off with Voskoboinikov. He’s a young kid. I told him, ‘Keep your mouth shut, and you won’t get in trouble. You didn’t see who I brought, and you don’t know anything.’ He was scared, but he got the idea. He’s no fool.
“I went back to Svirko and he had me clean the floor. I cleaned it, straightened things up. Then he poured me a glass of vodka, gave me a cigarette, and began to tell me about how you have to handle enemies and counter-revolutionaries. Then he asked me who saw me carrying Voskoboinikov. I told him, only the soldier on sentry duty. Svirko gave me two bottles of vodka and some conserves and cigarettes, and told me, ‘Divide it up with him, and tell him to keep his mouth shut. And as for you, don’t you be foolish either. Play straight with me and you won’t get into trouble. I’ll always stand behind you. I’m a friend of Berzin himself. In Moscow the People’s Commissar himself knows me. I can put you on a good road. . . . But if you start to flap your tongue, you’ll have only yourself to blame. It will go hard with you!’

‘After a few days Svirko called me in again. Offered me vodka, gave me a cigarette, and says to me, ‘Tomorrow you’ll take Voskoboinikov to Magadan, but he’ll try to escape. Watch him carefully. If he runs, shoot! You’ll be on the road for a week. It’s a long road, and it’s taiga all the way. If Voskoboinikov escapes, you’ll wind up before a court yourself. I know that he’ll try to escape. They’re going to shoot him in Magadan. It’s all the same to him how he dies. . . . Do you get me, Big Boy?’ Svirko looks at me and laughs; looks me in the eye and asks me again, ‘Get me?’ So I tell him, ‘Sure Comrade Chief, that’s what I say—maybe it’s better if he gets it over with right away. Why make him suffer?’

‘Right! You’ve got the idea,’ answers Svirko, and he claps me on the shoulder. ‘I can see that you’re a boy with a head on your shoulders. I wasn’t mistaken in you. I’ll be taking you out of the guard one of these days, and appointing you chief of a camp sector. If you try to keep your nose clean, do what’s right, you’ll go right to the top! But see to it that you do your duty. If he tries to escape, shoot him, and do it so that everything is legal. I don’t have to spell it out. You should know your business well enough.’

‘I was on my way out when he stops me and asks, ‘Who’s going with you as the second guard?’ I told him I didn’t know who would be appointed. Svirko gave me more cigarettes and a bottle of vodka and said, ‘Give this to your sergeant. Ask him to appoint the same soldier who was on guard duty at the prison. One outsider’s enough for this job. But get it across to him not to talk about things that are none of his business. When Voskoboinikov runs away, and you shoot him, it would be better that the other one didn’t see it. Fix things so that everything comes off right. You’ll know how better when you’re out there.’

‘I understood what Svirko wanted. When I was alone I started to realize how terrible it was, what I had to do. I asked the sergeant to send the soldier along with me to Magadan. I said he was a friend of mine. I gave him the bottle of vodka and the cigarettes, and said that somebody had sent them to me from Magadan in a package. I promised to bring him something else back from Magadan.

‘The whole night I couldn’t sleep. I thought all the time about what I had to do. If I didn’t do it, Svirko would ruin me. If I did do it, it would be terrible! And then, I had to figure out how to do it so that the other soldier wouldn’t see it. I thought the whole night, but I couldn’t find any answers. In the morning we took off with Voskoboinikov. The whole day long, riding along in the snow, looking at Voskoboinikov, bundled up in the sleigh, I kept wondering, how I could do it. I thought of everything. I even played with the idea of killing both of them, so as to get rid of any witnesses. I would have said that Voskoboinikov went for my friend, grabbed his rifle away from him and shot, and that I shot him. I was thinking of rid-
ing on to Magadan and telling everything I knew, what I had seen, what I was being forced to do. Yes, and I also thought of shooting myself. It seemed to me that I couldn’t fulfill this order, even if Svirko would ruin me if I failed.

“Then, along toward evening, we rode up to a little house standing by the road. Nobody lived there, but there was a stove, and other things for people traveling by to use. We stopped, left Voskoboinikov in the sleigh, and went into the house. Then it came to me all of a sudden. Now was the time to do it! I told the other soldier to start a fire and said I would go and fetch Voskoboinikov.

“I got out of the house. My hands, my feet are trembling, my heart’s pounding. ‘Now,’ I say to myself, ‘I’ll set the horses galloping down the road, and then I’ll shoot him as if he’s trying to get away with the horses.’ I opened the fur in which Voskoboinikov’s all wrapped up. He’s lying there, not moving. I poke him with my hand, to rouse him. Then I see he’s dead. Suddenly I feel good all over. I feel happy. ‘Thank God I won’t have to do it after all,’ I think.

“My first thought was to go back and report that Voskoboinikov died along the road. But then I realized I couldn’t do that. What did he die from? From his beatings! This would make things look bad for Svirko and I would be making plenty of trouble for myself.

“I rode away from the house with the body for a few meters, threw it out of the sleigh onto the road, and I beat the horses with the whip. They started galloping down the road. ‘There’s not a second to be lost,’ I thought to myself, ‘otherwise everything will fall through.’ I pointed the rifle at the back of the dead man, but my fingers wouldn’t do it. I couldn’t shoot. The horses were galloping off, getting farther away, and there I was standing before Voskoboinikov and couldn’t shoot. But I had to put a bullet hole in him. I pulled myself together and squeezed the trigger. I ran back a few steps, turned around and started running toward Voskoboinikov again, as if chasing him, and I started shouting and firing into the air. The other soldier jumped out of the house with his rifle in his hand, and not understanding what it was all about, also began to shoot.

“I went up to Voskoboinikov, trembling as if I had the fever. The other soldier came over and stood looking at me. ‘What’s the matter with you?’ he asked me. ‘I killed a dead man!’ I told him, and it scared me, the way I said it.”

Smirnov paused a moment, and then continued, “Every night I see that dead face! I can’t sleep. I am tired.” He let his head fall on the table and began to sob. “Do what you want to with me, Comrade Commander! I can’t stand it any more. Why did I shoot a dead man? What can I do now?” Presently he began again: “We got back to Urutukan late in the evening. I went to Svirko. He was already in bed. He came out, and the first thing he said to me was, ‘Well, how did it go?’ But I couldn’t answer him. He started to shake me by the shoulders, to bring me around, and kept saying, ‘Talk, talk, damn it! Why don’t you talk?’

‘Vodka!’ I said. He poured me a glass. I tossed it down and said, ‘More!’ He poured me more. I drank again. ‘More!’ I said. He wouldn’t give me any more.

‘Talk!’ he said. ‘How did it go?’

“I began to shout at him as hard as I could, ‘I’ll tell you! Give me more vodka!’ Svirko poured me out a third glass, and put it in front of me. He stepped off to one side, and stood there looking at me, not saying anything. I glanced at him. His look scared me. ‘Now he’ll kill me,’ I thought, ‘I shouldn’t drink the third glass.’ My head was whirling, there was a buzzing in my head. I stood up at attention, saluted and
said, 'Excuse me, Comrade Chief, I was worn out from the road. Everything's all right. Your order has been fulfilled one hundred percent!'

"What do you mean, my order?" asked Svirko in a quiet voice.

"I shot Voskoboinikov!"

"Svirko frowned at me and said in a strange tone, 'I didn't order you to shoot Voskoboinikov.'

"I couldn't believe my ears. 'What do you mean, Comrade Chief? Why, you said yourself . . .'

"What did I say? I said to you that if Voskoboinikov should run away, and if you couldn't catch him, that you should use your weapon, in accordance with regulations. I even asked you whether you understood your duty."

"Suddenly I got boiling mad at Svirko. I felt like running him through with my bayonet. I guess he understood what I was thinking. He could probably see from the look in my eyes. When I looked at him he was standing there with a smile, holding a pistol in his hand, toying with it. I got hold of myself.

"So what happened?" asked Svirko.

"I answered him, 'During a rest stop Voskoboinikov tried to escape with the horses. The other guard and I opened fire on him and he was killed.'

"'A pity!' said Svirko. 'He was supposed to appear before a court. But it can't be helped. You acted correctly, of course, according to the regulations. Report this to your commander. Turn the corpse over to the quartermaster, let them bury it. As for you, go to the kaserne and get some sleep. You're completely drunk! Come back here to me in the morning. Go now, and don't flap your tongue. Wait a minute.' Svirko tossed the pistol into the air, caught it again, clucking his tongue. 'What about the other soldier? Does he know anything?'

"No, he doesn't know anything. I mean, he knows that Voskoboinikov ran away . . .'

"When I left Svirko I was weak in the knees, hardly able to walk. I don't remember how I made it to the sleigh, out on the edge of the village. I don't remember carrying the corpse away. I don't remember coming back to the kaserne. I was drunk. I lay down and fell asleep. Late the next evening I came to Svirko again. I drank vodka with him. I told him everything, how it was. He was in a gay mood. He laughed a lot, and praised me. He gave me a thousand rubles, and said that he would take me out of the guard and make me a sector chief; not now, but later, after this business blew over.

"The commander put me under arrest for three days for reporting in drunk at the kaserne. Then they interrogated me in the operative-Chekist department. Svirko stood behind me, made them call off the investigation. My commander also interrogated me. He didn't believe what I told him. You see, he knows what Svirko did to Voskoboinikov during the interrogation. Then they arrested me and brought me here to you under guard.

"I don't know what will happen now, but it seems to look very bad for me. That's the whole truth. I didn't kill Voskoboinikov. I shot a dead man! He was looking at me with that bloody eye of his, where Svirko had stabbed him. I saw the stick stab his eye. I saw it in the keyhole. A dead man ran away! I shot a dead man! Funny, isn't it?" Smirnov began to laugh. The laugh turned into a hysterical cackling. The commander of the guard ordered him removed to the guardhouse and put into a solitary cell.

"In the guardhouse, sir."

"Do not interrogate him. Turn him over immediately to the central isolation prison of the operative Checkist department. I
have already made the necessary arrange-
ments there."
"Yes sir!"
"You will report immediately to me."
"Yes sir!"

**On the following day Svirko rode back to Urutukan.** The commander of the guard unit from Urutukan, after having finally arrived in Magadan, did not return to his unit. He was transferred to a unit in the deep taiga, in the most remote camp sector, where there was no road as yet.

In the operative-Chekist department in Magadan a new dossier was opened. On its cover was written in bold letters:

**FORMER SOLDIER OF THE GUARD**

Ivan Nikolaevich SMIRNOV

The dossier began with a secret report of Chief of the Urutukan Camp Sector Svirko, addressed to Berzin. Svirko had written:

. . . Before sending the accused pris-
oner Voskoboinikov to Magadan for trial, inasmuch as I felt this criminal to be especially important, I personally in-
structed senior soldier of the guard Smirnov. I reminded him of the necessity of guarding Voskoboinikov vigilantly. I warned him to observe strictly the stand-
ing regulations for escort guard duty.

On the day following his departure soldier Smirnov, in a state of complete intoxica-
tion, returned to Urutukan with Voskoboinikov, whom he had killed along the way. He declared that Voskoboinikov had attempted to escape, and that during this attempt he was shot. For appearing in the kaserne in a drunken condition Smirnov was arrested by his commander and placed in disciplinary confinement for three days. I subsequently established the fact that soldier Smirnov deliberately shot Voskoboinikov in order to avoid making the lengthy journey to Magadan.

I considered soldier Smirnov to be particularly culpable in having deliber-
ately murdered an important criminal awaiting trial. By his act Smirnov de-
stroyed information which could have led to the uncovering of an anti-Soviet conspiracy whose existence was known, and to the identification of its partici-
pants.

On Svirko’s report was written in Berzin’s hand, “Expedite processing. Bring bandit Smirnov to trial. Punish severely.”

The next document in the dossier was the report of the medical examination of Voskoboinikov. After a detailed anatomical description of the corpse was the statement, “Death occurred as a result of bullet wound inflicted at close range. Aside from the wound and powder burns there was no evidence of violence found on the corpse.”

After the medical report came the proto-
cols of the interrogations and all kinds of notes corroborating Smirnov’s guilt. His own statements concerning Voskoboinikov’s death were directly refuted by the medical report. His statements concerning Svirko were also refuted. There were no witnesses to support them. His denials of guilt were regarded as the usual ruse of the criminal to escape punishment.

By Berzin’s order the inquiry was brought to a close in the very shortest time. The formalities of administrative processing were accomplished with the minimum of delay.

The other soldier did not figure in the case. His statements were quite insignificant. He had not seen Smirnov shoot Voskoboinikov, and he remembered very well the words of the old experienced soldier, “Don’t flap your tongue.” He strictly observed this wise advise. After the very first interrogation they freed him and appointed him to serve in a remote unit of the guard force. All the others who had knowledge of the matter also kept prudently silent.

They did not even bring Smirnov before the court during the handling of his case at the special session. The sentence was decreed, as is usual in cases of this type,
in the absence of the accused. Smirnov remained in the solitary confinement cell for the condemned in the central isolation prison in Magadan. It was forbidden for anyone to talk with him, even the guard.

In his cell he conducted himself quietly and with complete indifference. He moved about very little, remained quiet, spent most of his time on his cot, staring vacantly. He never closed his eyes, day or night. The guards would often hear him whispering to himself, over and over, "I killed a dead man... I killed a dead man..."

When they came for him one night, to take him out and shoot him, he suddenly came to himself and regained his senses. He understood immediately what was about to happen. He offered stubborn resistance, and would let nobody come near him. When they tried to seize him, he struck out with incredible strength, swinging his giant fists and legs at anyone who came within reach, screaming and cursing. They finally overpowered him, tied him up and covered his eyes with a cloth, and carried him out.

In the spring, with the opening of navigation, Berzin went for a vacation on the Black Sea Coast, to rest and recuperate his strength. Svirko went with him, and did not come back to "Kolyma." Through Berzin's influence he was able to obtain appointment to a high post in Moscow.