The Zone

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ALMA CLASSICS
The Zone

A Prison Guard’s Notes
The names, events and dates given here are all real. I invented only those details that were not essential.

Therefore, any resemblance between the characters in this book and living people is intentional and malicious. And all the fictionalizing was unexpected and accidental.

The Author
Dear Igor Markovich!*

I’ll take the risk of presenting you with a delicate proposition. It’s basically as follows.

For three years now I have been trying to publish my prison-camp book, and trying all this time to do it as quickly as possible.

More to the point, it was specifically *The Zone* that I should have had published before anything else. For it was with this book that my ill-fated writing career began.

It turns out that it’s extremely hard to find a publisher. I, for example, was rejected by several. And I wouldn’t want to hide this.

The reasons for rejection were almost boilerplate. These were the basic arguments, if it’s of any interest:

The prison-camp theme is exhausted. The reader is tired of endless prison memoirs. After Solzhenitsyn, the subject ought to be closed.

This idea does not stand up to critical examination. It goes without saying that I am not Solzhenitsyn. But does that deprive me of a right to exist?

Also, our books are completely different. Solzhenitsyn describes political prison camps. I – criminal ones. Solzhenitsyn was a prisoner. I – a prison guard. According to Solzhenitsyn, camp is hell. Whereas I think that hell is in us ourselves.

Please believe that I am not comparing degrees of talent. Solzhenitsyn is a great writer and a monumental figure. But enough about that.

The other argument for not publishing my book was much harder to refute. The fact is, my manuscript is not a finished work.
It is a diary of sorts, chaotic notes, a set of unorganized materials.

The publishers were confused by such disarray. They wanted a more standard form.

It seemed to me that a general artistic idea could be traced in this disorder. One poetic hero moves throughout it. A certain unity of time and place has been observed. In a way, a single banal idea is declared – the world is absurd...

Then I tried to foist *The Zone* on them as a collection of short stories. The publishers said that this would be unprofitable, that the reading public is hungry for novels and sagas.

The matter was complicated by the fact that *The Zone* had been arriving in parts. Before my departure from the Soviet Union I microfilmed the manuscript, and my executor gave out pieces of the film to a few courageous French women who were able to smuggle my work through customs borders. The original is still in the Soviet Union.

Over the last few years I’ve been receiving tiny packages from France. And I’ve been trying to compose a unified whole out of the separate pieces.

In some places the film is damaged. (Wherever my kind benefactresses may have hidden it I do not know.) A few fragments were lost entirely.

The reconstruction of a manuscript from microfilm is a laborious job. Even in America, for all its technological greatness, it is not easy. And, by the way, not inexpensive. I’ve restored about thirty per cent of it to date.

I’m enclosing a piece of the finished text with this letter. I’ll send off the next part in a few days. You’ll receive the rest of it in the next few weeks. Tomorrow I rent a photo-enlarger.

Perhaps we will be able to make a finished whole out of all of this. I’ll try to fill in bits here and there with my irresponsible comments.

The main thing is: be tolerant. And as the prisoner Khamrayev used to say, setting off on a wet job* – Godspeed!
OLD KALYU PAKHAPIL HATED the occupying forces. What he liked was chorus singing, also bitter home-brewed beer and plump little children.

“Only Estonians ought to live in these parts, and no one else,” Pakhapil used to say. “Foreigners have no business here.”

The peasants would listen to him, nodding their heads in approval.

Then the Germans came. They played harmonicas, sang, treated the children to chocolate. Old Kalyu didn’t like any of it. He was silent for a long time, then gathered his things and went into the forest.

It was a dark forest, and from a distance it gave the impression of being impassable. There Pakhapil hunted, clubbed fish, slept on pine branches. In brief – he lived there till the Russians ousted the occupiers. And when the Germans left, Pakhapil returned. He showed up in Rakvere, where a Soviet captain awarded him a medal. The medal was decorated with four incomprehensible words, a figure and an exclamation mark.

“What does an Estonian need a medal for?” Pakhapil wondered for a long time.

Yet all the same, he carefully pinned it to the lapel of his cheviot jacket. This jacket Pakhapil had worn only once: in Lansman’s store, when he bought it.

So he lived and worked as a glazier. But when the Russians announced general mobilization, Pakhapil once again disappeared.

“Estonians ought to live here,” he said, departing, “and as for Ivans, Fritzes and all these Greenlanders, there’s no place for them here!”

Pakhapil again went into the forest, which seemed impassable only from a distance. And again he hunted, thought and was silent. And everything was going well.
But the Russians organized a round-up. The forest resounded with cries. It became crowded, and Pakhapil was arrested. He was tried as a deserter, beaten and spat on in the face. The one who exerted himself the most in this was the captain who had awarded him the medal.

And then Pakhapil was sent to the south, where the Kazakhs live. There he soon died, most likely from hunger and the alien land.

His son Gustav graduated from the Merchant Marine Academy in Tallinn, on Luise Street, and received a diploma as a radio operator.

Evenings he would sit in the Mundi Bar and say to frivolous girls, “A true Estonian ought to live in Canada! In Canada, and nowhere else.”

In the summer he was drafted for guard duty. The training camp was in Yosser. Everything was done by command: sleep, meals, conversation. People talked about vodka, about bread, about horses, about miners’ salaries. All this Gustav hated, and he conversed only in his own tongue. Only in Estonian. Even with the guard dogs.

Besides this, he drank in solitude and, if anyone bothered him, got into fights. He also allowed “incidents of a female order” (to use Political Instructor Khuriyev’s expression).

“How egocentric you are, Pakhapil!” the political instructor reproached him cautiously.

Gustav, bashfully, asked for a pencil and a piece of paper and scrawled out clumsily: “Yesterday of this year I abused an alcoholic beverage. After which I dropped down in the mud a soldier’s dignity. Henceforward I promise. Private Pakhapil.”

After some hesitation, he always added: “Request not to refuse.”

Then came the money from his Aunt Reyet. Pakhapil would get a litre of Chartreuse in the store and go off to the cemetery. There, in the green twilight, the crosses shone white. Farther on, by the edge of a reservoir, was a neglected grave and beside it a plywood obelisk. Pakhapil would sit down heavily on the little knoll, have a drink and smoke.
“Estonians should live in Canada,” he would mutter softly beneath the rhythmical humming of mosquitoes.

For some reason they didn’t bite him.

Early one morning, a homely-looking officer appeared in the division. Judging by his glasses, an ideological worker. An assembly was announced.

“Go to the Lenin Room!” an orderly shouted to the soldiers smoking near the parallel bars.

“We can’t eat politics,” the soldiers grumbled. But they went inside and took seats.

“I was a slender string in the thunderous concert of the war,” Lieutenant Colonel Mar began.

“Poems,” Balodis the Latvian drawled in disappointment.

Outside the window, the quartermaster sergeant and the staff clerk had caught a pig. The friends had tied a belt around her legs and were trying to drag her up a ramp into the back of a transport van. The pig screamed wildly, and her piercing squeals made the back of one’s neck ache. She fell on her belly. Her hooves slipped on the manure-muddied ramp. The little eyes disappeared in folds of fat.

Sergeant Major Yevchenko walked across the yard. He kicked the pig with his foot. Then he picked up the shaft of a shovel that had been left lying on the grass.

“In sections of the Soviet Army, a noble tradition is developing,” Lieutenant Colonel Mar was saying. “Soldiers and officers take the graves of fallen soldiers under their patronage. They painstakingly reconstruct the story of their martial achievements. They establish contact with the relatives and dear ones of the heroes. It is the duty of one and all to develop and strengthen such a tradition in every way possible. Let spiteful critics in the world of ready cash trumpet the conflicts of fathers and sons. Let them fan the cooked-up legend of the antagonism between them. Our youth sacredly honour the burial of their fathers, affirming in this way the indissoluble bond between the generations.”

They dragged the pig up a roughly planed board. The edges of the van, painted a light green, shuddered with a metallic
ring. The driver stuck his head out the window to watch what was going on.

Nearby, the Moldavian Dastyan, excused from duty because of illness, was turning on the horizontal bars. He was waiting for orders from the commanding officer of his section and went around without a belt, quietly singing to himself.

“Your company is stationed across from a cemetery,” the lieutenant colonel droned, “and this is deeply symbolic. Established by us is the fact that among others we have here the resting places of heroes of the Great Patriotic War. Including also medal-bearing ones. In this way, all the conditions are ripe for taking these fallen soldiers under our special patronage.”

They dragged the pig into the back of the van. She lay motionless, only twitching her pink ears. Soon she would be brought to the slaughterhouse, where a greasy fog hung in the air. With a practised gesture, the slaughterer would hitch her up to the ceiling by a tendon. Then he would stab her in the heart with a long white knife. After one cut, he would quickly rip off her hide, with its growth of dirty wool. And then all the servicemen would get sick from the smell of blood.

“Who here is Pakhapil?”

Gustav started. He got up and remembered what had just happened a moment before. How Lance Corporal Petrov had raised his hand and said, choking with laughter, “There is already one such soldier in our subdivision. He has taken a fallen hero under his patronage and tends his grave. It is Instructor Pakhapil!”

“Who here is Pakhapil?” Mar asked mistrustfully. “You’re Pakhapil, are you?”


“In the name of the company commander, I extend to you our gratitude. Your initiative will be popularized. HQ is planning a ceremonial meeting of exemplary officers in battle training. You will come with me and tell them about your accomplishments. On the way there we will sketch out a plan.”

“Basically, I’m an Estonian,” Pakhapil began to say.
“That’s even better,” the lieutenant colonel said, cutting him off, “from the point of view of brotherly internationalism.”

It was crowded at headquarters. Servicemen stood in groups beneath work schedules, artistically arranged exhibits and visual propaganda materials. Boots and wet hair glistened. The room smelt of tobacco and tar.

They walked up the stairs. Mar put his arm around Pakhapil. On the landing, people surrounded them.

“Get to know each other,” the lieutenant colonel said in a civilian tone of voice. “These are our camp beacons. Sergeant Tkhapsayev, Sergeant Gafiatulin, Sergeant Chichiaishvili, Junior Sergeant Shakhmametyev, Lance Corporal Laury, Privates Kemoklidze and Ovsepyan…”

“What the devil,” Gustav thought. “Nothing but kikes!”

But just then, the bell rang. Everyone angled towards the cigarette urns. They tossed in their cigarettes and went inside the spacious hall.

And Pakhapil found himself on the platform. Below him, faces shone white. To his left were members of the presidium, a carafe and a red calico curtain, beyond which he could see a double bass propped up offstage.

Pakhapil glanced at the people, touched his metal dog tag, then stepped forwards.

“I am, basically, an Estonian,” he began.

It was quiet in the hall. Under the windows, jingling, a tramcar went by.

In the evening, Gustav Pakhapil was being jolted around in the back seat of a car from HQ. He was recalling his speech, and how he had poured water from the carafe, how the glass had tinkled and a general in the presidium had smiled. And how they had pinned a memorial badge on him. (Three incomprehensible words, a figure and a globe.) And then Mar had spoken, pointing out Private Pakhapil’s valuable initiative. Something about enterprise, growth and perseverance… And something else concerning patriotic education, something on the order of continuity and indissoluble ties, with the aim of patronage of the graves of fallen heroes. Although Pakhapil
is Estonian, because of the brotherly friendship between the two nations…

Before him loomed the driver’s back. Trees with meagre crowns flew past them, sun-bleached hills, the wretched taiga green.

When the car bumped over the railroad crossing, Gustav said to the driver, “I’ll get out here.” The driver, without looking around, waved goodbye and made a U-turn.

Gustav Pakhapil marched alongside the lustreless rails, then climbed up the embankment. The plank road took him to the local village store.

There his pockets filled up heavily.

He cut through an abandoned stadium and stepped onto the little bridge over the cemetery ditch.

It was raw and quiet. The leaves twittered in the wind.

Gustav unbuttoned his dress jacket. Sat down on the little knoll. Laid the ham on his knee. The bottle he set in the grass.

After which he lit a cigarette, leaning against the red plywood monument.
Unless I’m wrong, we met in 1964 – that is to say, soon after my demobilization from prison-camp guard duty. By then I was a fully formed person, endowed with all sorts of oppressive complexes.

Since you didn’t know me before the army, you can hardly imagine how much I had changed, for I had grown up a normal young man. I had a set of loving parents. True, they had separated early. But the divorce hardly damaged their relationship with me. More than that, the divorce hardly damaged their relationship with each other, in the sense that even before the divorce their relationship wasn’t so great.

I didn’t develop an orphan complex. If anything, just the opposite, since all my classmates’ fathers had died at the front.

Alone with my mother, I didn’t stand out. Having a living father might have given the impression of bourgeois excess. Thus I killed two birds with one stone (I have no idea if this expression is appropriate here), which is to say, I exploited all the advantages of an adored son while escaping the reputation of being a trouble-free boy.

My father was a sort of hidden treasure. He paid alimony, but not very regularly. This is natural. After all, only declared savings yield good interest.

I had normal, ordinary abilities, a commonplace appearance that had a slight, phoney Neapolitan shading, and commonplace expectations. All signs pointed to a typical Soviet biography.

I belonged to an amiable national minority, was blessed with excellent health. From childhood on, I had had no morbid preoccupations.

I didn’t collect stamps, didn’t operate on earthworms and didn’t build model aeroplanes. What’s more, I didn’t even particularly like to read. I liked going to the movies and loafing.

Three years at university had little effect on my personality. It seemed like a continuation of high school, maybe on a
higher level, plus young ladies, sports and a pitiful minimum of political rebelliousness.

I didn’t know that it was just then that I reached the height of well-being. From then on, everything went downhill. Unhappy love, debts, marriage… And as a culmination of all this – guard duty in a prison camp.

Love stories often end with prison. I just got my doors mixed up, and instead of ending up in the prisoners’ barracks, I landed in the army ones.

What I saw there shocked me completely.

There’s a classic storyline that goes like this: a poor boy peeks through a chink in a wall on a nobleman’s estate. He sees the nobleman’s little boy riding a pony. From that moment on, his life is given over to one end – to get rich. He can no longer return to his former life. His existence is poisoned by having been initiated into a mystery.

I, too, looked through a chink. Only what I saw was not riches, but the truth.

I was shaken by the depth and variety of life. I saw how low a man could fall, and how high he was able to rise.

For the first time, I understood what freedom is, and cruelty and violence. I saw freedom behind bars, cruelty as senseless as poetry, violence as common as dampness.

I saw a man who had been completely reduced to an animal state. I saw what he could be gladdened by. And it seemed to me that my eyes opened.

The world in which I found myself was horrifying. In that world, people fought with sharpened rasp files, ate dogs, covered their faces with tattoos and sodomized goats. In that world, people killed for a package of tea.

In that world, I saw men with a gruesome past, a repulsive present and a tragic future.

I was friends with a man who had once upon a time pickled his wife and children in a barrel.

The world was horrible. But life continued. What is more, life’s usual proportions stayed the same. The ratio of good and evil, grief and happiness, remained unchanged.
That life had in it whatever you could name. Diligence, dignity, love, depravity, patriotism, wealth, poverty. There were lumpenproletariat and rich profiteers, careerists and profligates, conformists and rebels, functionaries and dissidents.

But the content of these concepts was radically changed. The usual hierarchy of values had been demolished. What had once seemed important receded into the background. Trivialities blocked the horizon.

A new scale of values for “the good things of life” arose. On this scale, people especially valued food, warmth, the chance to avoid work. The commonplace became precious. The precious – unreal.

A postcard from home precipitated an emotional upheaval. A bumblebee flying into the prisoners’ barracks could cause a sensation. A squabble with a guard was experienced as an intellectual triumph.

In maximum security I knew a man, a long-term recidivist, who dreamt of becoming a bread-cutter. This job carried with it enormous advantages. Once he got it, a zek* could be likened to a Rothschild. The heels of bread were comparable to diamond deposits.

Fantastic efforts were required to land such a position. You had consciously to sell out, lie, climb over corpses. You had to bribe, blackmail and use extortion – fight to win at all costs.

This kind of effort in the outside world would have opened the way to the sinecures of the Party, economic and bureaucratic leadership. The highest levels of government power are reached by the same means.

Once he became a bread-cutter, the zek fell apart psychologically. The struggle for power had exhausted his inner strength. He was a gloomy, suspicious, lonely man. He reminded me of a Party boss, tortured by oppressive complexes.

One episode comes to mind. Some prisoners were digging a trench outside of Yosser. Among them was a burglar named Yenin.

It was getting on towards lunchtime. Yenin shovelled one last clod, reduced it to fine sand, then leant over the pile of dirt.
He was surrounded by zeks who had fallen silent.
He lifted a tiny thing out of the dirt and rubbed it on his sleeve for a long time. It was a shard of a cup, the size of a three-copeck piece. It still had on it the fragment of a design – a girl in a blue dress. The only thing left intact was her little shoulder and a blue sleeve.

You could see tears in the zek’s eyes. He pressed the glass to his lips and said quietly, “Seance!”

In prison-camp jargon, “seance” signified any experience of an erotic nature, and even beyond that, any instance of positive sensual emotion. A woman in the zone was “seance”. A pornographic photograph – “seance”. But a piece of fish in the slops was “seance”, too.

“Seance!” Yenin said.

And the zeks who surrounded him confirmed in unison, “Seance!”

The world in which I found myself was horrible. Nevertheless, I smiled no less frequently than I do now, and was not sad more often.

When there is time, I’ll tell you about all this in more detail.

How did you like my first pages? I’m enclosing the fragment that follows.

PS: In our Russian émigré colony you come across wonderful advertisements. There’s one posted across from my apartment house: “Seamster Wanted!” A little to the left, on a telephone booth: “Translation from the Russian and back. Ask for Arik.”