Siberian Prison Camps
Excerpts from a monologue

... so this whole project started in 2000 when there was a Magnum show in Krasnoyarsk. It was part of a Soros Foundation project to do exhibitions in the former Soviet republics and so there was an exhibition called East of Magnum in Siberia. The idea was to send a Magnum photographer to do a local workshop to accompany the exhibition, so I went and did a workshop with 15 local photographers.

The first time I was in Krasnoyarsk was in 1989, when I took the Trans-Siberian railway all the way east. Then, we weren't even allowed out of the train: all you could see was the station. A lot of these camps are along the Trans-Siberian railway, they were what I saw from the train. So it was strange, ten years later, to be able to go to Krasnoyarsk, which was a forbidden city until 1994 because of its nuclear sites, and a huge aluminum factory.

Since I didn’t know the region, I told them to find me a subject and we’d go out and shoot every day. On one of these days a local press photographer said, “We’ll go to a local prison camp, a former Gulag.” So I was quite surprised these things still exist - I wasn’t prepared at all. We ended up in camp number 27 which I later understood was some kind of model camp, but it’s a working camp, still. In every camp there is an average of 1,500-2,500 prisoners; some camp in camp 27, but whenever an official ambassador or foreign media team come to Siberia, they go to visit camp 27, if they don’t have any specific demands.

What I saw there was quite surprising. I read Solzhenitsyn 15-20 years ago, so I had a very grim idea of these camps, if they still existed anyway. I had an idea of black and white, dark pictures, torture. But the camp itself is sort of a Disneyland. You come into a gate decorated with metal soldiers made by the prisoners, there are huge murals, famous Russian paintings about glorious moments from the middle ages or even earlier, and at the entrance also there’s a huge steam train on top of the gate, there’s a wooden windmill, Don Quixote, there is a pyramid, Egyptian style. There are all kinds of things, ornaments that were really very surprising, like wooden houses to keep the guards in, just like you would see at the entrance of any cheap amusement park. You come into a world in colour, all the walls and interiors, mostly light blue, light green. Psychologically chosen colours, I guess, to put prisoners’ minds at rest.

We could work quite freely for the few hours that we were there. So I decided to speak to the only photographer who spoke English, not the same one who originally led us to the camp. When the workshop was finished I asked him, “How many more camps are here? Is there a way to visit more of them? Are they all like this?” At first I didn’t get any answer, but a few months later (the workshop was in August) I got an email from him, saying, “Well, I saw the general.” There is one general in charge of most of the camps around Krasnoyarsk: there are about 120 camps in this

... hele projektet begyndte i 2000, da der var en Magnum-udstilling i Krasnojarsk. Den var en del af et projekt under Soros Fonden med at lave udstillinger i de tidligere sovjetrepublikker, og så var der altså en udstilling i Siberien, der hed East of Magnum i Krasnojarsk. Det ideen var at sende en Magnum-fotograf ud for at afholde en lokal workshop i forbinderi med udstillingen, så jeg tog afsted og lævede en workshop for lokal fotografer.


Da jeg ikke kendte egnen, bad jeg dem om at finde et motiv til mig, som vi kunne tage ud af fotograferne hver dag. Det var af de dage, at en lokal pressefotograf sagde til mig: “Lad os tage ud til en af fangelejrene her på egnen, en tidligere Gulag”. Jeg var ret overbevist over, at sådan en sted var stedig fundet – jeg havde overhovedet ikke forventet det. Vi endte i lejr nr. 27, som jeg senere fandt ud af var en slags manøverlejr, men altså stedig en fungerende lejr. Der er i gennemsnitligt 1.500-2.500 fanger i hver lejr, dito i lejr nr. 27, og når en official udsending eller den udenlandsk præsence kommer til Siberien, er det lejr nr. 27, de besøger, med mindre de har specifik krav.


Det er alle mulige slags ting, ornament der virkelig er meget overraskende. F.eks. viser en stol, som man ser i de mulige forhandlingstal, men er en gang til en billig forlygangsskab. Alt er i farve, alle væggene og interiørene, for det meste lysblå og lysgrøn, psykologisk valgt farve, jeg trof, for at få fangelejerne til at stille.

Vi var i stand til at opfylde grans efterskud, vi måtte tage, vi var der. Jeg bestemte mig for at tale med den seneste fotografer, som kunne engelsk, dvs. ikke den samme der oprindeligt havde ført os til lejr - og da workshoppevnen var overbefolket, spurgte jeg ham: ”Hvor mange lejerne er her? Kan man komme til at besøge nogle få af dem? Se alle de sammen sådan her ud?” Jeg fik ikke noget svar med det samme, men et par måneder senere (workshopen var i august) fik jeg en mail fra ham, hvor der stod: ”Jeg har talt med generalen.” Det er en enhed general, der har ansvaret for hoved-

very large area, like six, seven hundred kilometres outside of Krasnoyarsk. The local photographer told some influence - he worked for the most important paper there, and he was one of the P Tamil photographers that had climbed Everest and so he was like a local hero. He knew everyone and he got a small paper from the general with the numbers on it, I mean every camp has a number, one to 45 or something, and he said “We can start in April.”

I went over for three months. I actually had enough to make a book from that trip, but I decided to go back in the wintertime because in the summer months, it was good weather, good light, and I thought this will not look very believable. Wintertime is when everybody sees Siberia – in summer, it’s very warm, 30-35 degrees. I had the best summer of my life.

... I saw three types of camps. One type is mostly located in the big cities. In Krasnoyarsk, there are about six or seven in the centre of the city. They’re mostly factory camps, manufacturing furniture, re-

parten af lejerne omkring Krasnojarsk. Der findes omkring 130 lejre i dette meget store område, der ligger ca. 6-700 kilometer udenfor Krasnojarsk. Den lokale fotograf havde en vis indbydelse - han arbejdede for den føderale avis i området, og han var en del af det olympiske højde, der havde besteget Everest, så han var en slags lokal helt. Han kendte alle. Han fik så et lille stykke peppe fra generalen med forskellige tal på - hver lejr har et nummer fra 1 til 45 eller lignende - og sagde: ”Vi kan begynde i April.”

Jeg tog deromhe i tre måneder. Den rejse var egentlig nok i sig selv til en bøg, men alligevel besluttede jeg mig for at vende tilbage om vinteren, fordi der var så god vej i sommermånedene, så god lys, og jeg mente ikke, det ville se specielt troendeligt ud. Alle forhender Sibiriens med siner, men om sommeren er det meget varmt, 30-35 grader. Jeg havde den bedste sommer i mit liv.

... Jeg så tre forskellige typer lejr. Den ene type findes for det meste i de store byer. I Krasnojarsk ligger der en seks-sys af slag-
is cutting down forest, and agriculture. There are some very big farms there; they raise cattle, pigs, chickens, and horses, like the old Soviet system. But the farms I saw — and these were the ones that had been selected for me to see — were in a terrible state. Coming into the forest camps, it was like entering Bosnia during the war: ruined tractors everywhere, machines that didn’t work. The third type of camp I didn’t get permission to photograph that summer, because another general was in charge of them. The excuse (maybe it was true) was that one camp had had a big fire, and that there had been floods and a bridge was broken. It took us quite a lot of effort to finally get into these camps in winter-time. They were mostly wooden camps, like some kind of cowboy fort, completely in the forest. Around those camps the trees are cut, and since they have cut down a lot of trees they now have to travel a long way to find trees left to cut. The conditions there were much harder than in the city prison camps.

I decided to use colour. I don’t think there was even a possibilitiy to get the real situation. I don’t think so anyway. I never saw any really hard situations like torture, very bad situations. We could never photograph at night; we asked many times, the only time that happened was the women’s disco. So I decided to play the game, since the original idea — which was the only reason we had permission to photograph in the first place — was to take a positive approach to the new situation in the camps.

Actually I quite liked that idea because I don’t likemise en scene myself, but when people do it for me I never say no. My colleague had the typical Russian style of many press photographers to set up situations. So either he set up something with the prisoners, or the colonel or bodyguards set up something, in a way it was a double mise en scene.

First there was the choice of our guide who showed us the things we wanted to see, though in most camps we could open every door we asked for. In that sense, they showed us everything we wanted to see, except situations. That was something they


Jeg valgte at arbejde i farve. Jeg tror ikke, der var reel mulighed for at imdulde forholdene, som de virkelige var. Det tror jeg i hvert fald ikke Jeg var aldrig videre til nogen nighet banke situationer, som f.eks. tortur eller andre meget alvorlige situationer. Vi måtte aldrig fotografe om natten. Vi spurgte om lov adskillige gange, men den eneste gang, de slette, var, da der var kriminalske. Jeg valgte derfor at lade mig, eftersom den oprindelige ide — der var den eneste grund til, at vi overhovedet fik lov til at fotografe var — at tage en positiv tilgang til de nye forhold i lejene.

Jeg kunne fakse faktisk virkelig lidt den ide, fordi jeg ikke selv lever i søndag isærheder — men hvis nogen gør det for mig, siger jeg at jeg aldrig nej luf. Min kollega havde den for mange russiske pressfotograf fakse typiske stil med at opstille situationer. Enten stillede han nogen op sammen med fangerne eller obersten og bodyguards stillede nogen op sammen, så på en måde var det en slags dobbelt isærheder.

Forst valgte vores guide at vise os de ting, han ville have os se selv — små virksomheder, så som vi i de fleste leje godt måtte åbne en stor, der blev om. På sin vis viste de os alt, hvad vi ønskede at se, uden at forhindre situationer. Det var noget, de kunne arrange efter behov. Vi kom f.eks. ind i en speciel celle med tre eller fire fanger, og da obersten, der var med os, havde bemærket, at jeg godt kunne lidde når folk arbejdede eller var beskæftiget med noget, så de ikke bare stod og stredede på korset, gjorde han det for os mest af tinget. Han gik ind i celle og sagde: "I bliver fotografere, fortsat med arbejdet." Hvis de ikke var i gang med noget, give han dem højt at bære i. Der blev også altid lagt en hibb på bordene rundt omkring eller folk begyndte at gå rettfer det på deres værne, spille tennis osv. Min kollega rørredet med selvfølgelighed rundt på folk, og jeg fotograferede ham, mens han gjorde det. Jeg isærhede aldrig selv nogen situationer. Jeg tror ikke jeg bør
Ib. 33 Kastrupjørk. No bad tennis

prisoners, they said. So I asked if I could see them play. They were a bit put out by that, but eventually they found two prisoners. Then they had to find rackets for them, which took another half an hour. They seemed happy with that, but I asked them where the balls were, but even after another hour’s search, they couldn’t find any. So we had this ridiculous scene with me pretending to photograph these two prisoners pretending to play tennis without any tennis balls. It was like a crazy mime scene. [...] My colleague saw The Truman Show in the local cinema in Kastrupjørk, and that’s how he referred to the set-up pictures in the camps. For instance, in every camp, there was a library, with all the Russian classics and also some western books. Every camp wanted to show us the library, because that’s a positive sign. Every time, they some prisoners reading books, but some of them had the books the wrong way round.

Sometimes when we came to a camp, we’d have to wait two or 3 days to get in. There was no real explanation for why we had to wait, and finally we saw that most of the camp was been repainted, the prisoners had new uniforms and so on. But sometimes they didn’t even know we were coming – things don’t always work very well there, sometimes the phone was broken, sometimes the fax. There’s no Internet. They were really surprised to see us, especially in wintertime. Sometimes it would cause a bit of panic, we’d have to wait a few hours, but we were well treated. Sometimes first an officer would come with a jeep and invite us to a restaurant, sometimes we had to stay in the best apartment in town, only reserved for high ranking visiting officers like generals who came to visit. It wasn’t like we suffered or anything.

The colonel, our first bodyguard, always tried to explain how much effort was being made to reach certain western standards in the camp system. He gave us a lot of statistics, how long people had to stay in there for what kind crimes. He said there weren’t any political prisoners there any more, though I heard later that there are a few, and that numbers are increasing, though nothing like in the 1950s and 1960s. I know the prison situation in the US and Europe a bit – there, prisoners are mostly in isolated cells with 3, 4, 5 prisoners, and all kind of protective elements like video cameras, guards with guns. Here, it’s seems ameteurish. It looks quite easy to escape. But you can see in the faces of the prisoners there must be some kind of discipline, enforced by the guards. I guess the punishments are pretty bad when something happens, but I never saw that. Since most of these camps are labour camps, there are lots of open spaces and there are always prisoners walking around. So it seems like they have a lot of rec-

ation, but actually it’s probably because machinery has broken down or something. But even in the camps where the machines are working, maybe it’s all set up for us. I saw people playing football, soccer, basketball, all the time. And there were sources after work. The food isn’t great, but I tasted it many times, often in the restaurants for the prisoners, and the bread is high quality, though the soup isn’t, and there’s no meat.
1.K. 27 Krakałówka. One cube of bread and a bowl of fish

1.K. 22 Tbiatynian, Boy’s camp (14-18 years old). Lunchtime
But I got a sense of freedom there in those camps. After a while I asked myself what was best – being here, or being in prison somewhere else. Here in winter it’s hell, but in summer, with all the colours and people walking around, I had to convince myself I was really in a former Gulag. Maybe that’s a big mistake.

Once there was a confrontation between me and the general when we visited the guards’ Olympics. It’s a four day big party, when all the guards from all the camps come together in the forest with tents, beer and vodka of course. The wives are there, and they have a small competition, some volleyball, some spear throwing. Local TV came to interview me and the general together and I said that if I had a choice between staying in an American and the Siberian labour camp, I’d choose the Siberian labour camp. Of course my friends afterwards all said I was being ridiculous. It just shows that I don’t know what the situation there really was, because I was always presented with a kind of a theatre. After all of these omissions, and der er altid en del fængser der går omløb. Så det virker som om de får masser af rettak, men det er sikkert, men det er ikke det, og det er ikke det, og det er ikke det...

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