



Carl de Keyzer  
**Zona**

# 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 aluminium 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 is 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; same thing in camp 27, but whenever an official ambassador or foreign media team come to Siberia, they get 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. Everything was 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 that?" 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 the camps around Krasnoyarsk; there are about 130 camps in this

... hele projektet begyndte i 2000, da der var en *Magnum*-udstilling i Krasnoyarsk. 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 Sibirien, der hed *East of Magnum*. Idéen var at sende en *Magnum*-fotograf ud for at afholde en lokal workshop i forbindelse med udstillingen, så jeg tog afsted og lavede en workshop for 15 lokale fotografer.

Første gang jeg var i Krasnoyarsk var i 1989, da jeg tog med den transsibiriske jernbane hele vejen østpå. Dengang måtte man ikke engang stige af toget, det eneste man kunne se var stationen. Mange af lejrene ligger langs den transsibiriske jernbane, jeg så dem fra toget. Det var mærkeligt 10 år efter at kunne rejse til Krasnoyarsk, der var en forbudt by indtil 1994 på grund af dens atomkraftværker og enorme aluminiumsfabrik.

Da jeg ikke kendte egnen, bad jeg dem om at finde et motiv til mig, som vi kunne tage ud at fotografere hver dag. Det var en 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 overrasket over, at sådanne steder stadig fandtes – jeg var overhovedet ikke forberedt på det. Vi endte i lejr nr. 27, som jeg senere fandt ud af var en slags mønsterlejr, men altså stadig en fungerende lejr. Der er i gennemsnitligt 1.500-2.500 fanger i hver lejr, ditto i lejr nr. 27, og når en officiel udsending eller den udenlandske presse kommer til Sibirien, er det lejr nr. 27, de besøger, med mindre de har specielle krav.

Hvad jeg så var ganske overraskende. Jeg læste Solzhenitsyn for 15-20 år siden og havde et meget dårligt billede af disse lejre, hvis de altså stadig eksisterede. Jeg havde en idé om sort/hvide billeder, tortur. Men selve lejren er en slags *Disneyland*. Man kommer ind ad en port udsmykket med metalsoldater, som fangerne har lavet. Der er store vægmalerier, berømte russiske malerier af storladne øjeblikke fra middelalderen og endnu tidligere, og ved indgangen er der et stort damplokomotiv over porten. Der er en vindmølle af træ, Don Quixote, der er en pyramide i ægyptisk stil. Der er alle mulige slags ting, ornamenter, der virkelig er meget overraskende, f.eks. vagtstuer af træ, som man ser dem ved indgangen til en billig forlystelsespark. Alt var i farve, alle væggene og interiørerne, for det meste lyseblåt og lysegrønt, psykologisk valgte farver, vil jeg tro, for at give fangerne ro i sindet.

Vi var i stand til at arbejde ganske frit de få timer, vi var der. Jeg bestemte mig for at tale med den eneste fotograf, der kunne engelsk – dvs. ikke den samme der oprindeligt havde ført os til lejren – og da workshoppen var overstået, spurgte jeg ham: "Hvor mange lejre er her? Kan man komme til at besøge nogle flere af dem? Ser de alle sammen sådan her ud?" Jeg fik ikke noget svar med det samme, men et par måneder senere (workshoppen var i august) fik jeg en mail fra ham, hvor der stod: "Jeg har talt med generalen." Det er en enkelt general, der har ansvaret for hoved-



I.K. 27 Krasnoyarsk, 2001

very large area, like six, seven hundred kilometres outside of Krasnoyarsk. The local photographer had some influence – he worked for the most important paper there, and he was part of the Olympic team 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 how 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 lejrene omkring Krasnoyarsk. Der findes omkring 130 lejre i dette meget store område, der ligger ca. 6-700 kilometer udenfor Krasnoyarsk. Den lokale fotograf havde en vis indflydelse – han arbejdede for den førende avis i området, og han var en del af det olympiske hold, der havde besteg Everest, så han var en slags lokal helt. Han kendte alle. Han fik så et lille stykke papir 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 derover i tre måneder. Den rejse var egentlig nok i sig selv til en bog, men alligevel besluttede jeg mig for at vende tilbage om vinteren, fordi der var så godt vejr i sommermånederne, så godt lys, og jeg mente ikke, det ville se specielt troværdigt ud. Alle forbinder Sibirien med vinter, men om sommeren er der meget varmt, 30-35 grader. Jeg havde den bedste sommer i mit liv.

... Jeg så tre forskellige typer lejre. Den ene type findes for det meste i de store byer. I Krasnoyarsk ligger der en seks-syv af slag-



Kansk. Youth camp. Young school teacher going to class

pairing tractors. There's also a big industry of small artefacts like wooden bears, the symbol of Russia, black roses which is also the symbol of being a prisoner, which many people have in their houses, and romantic paintings that are sold to tourists in Moscow.

The second system I found is some kind of village camp. These are mostly quite remote. We visited four or five, about 600km from Krasnoyarsk.

We hired a car, but the last 100km, they rescued us with the camp jeep because our car was stuck in the mud. It took about two days to get there. In these camps, individual prisoners still live in barracks. There's not much of a wall around it, because they are very far from the nearest city. Prisoners who can persuade their families to join them can live in separate houses. They are real villages because there are other people living there, people who have started small businesses. There's a school, there are children. The camp itself is quite open. The main business there

sen midt inde i byen. Det er fortrinsvis fabrikslejre, der producerer møbler, reparerer traktorer osv. Der er også en stor produktion af små kunstgenstande, såsom bjørne, symbolet på Rusland, af træ, sorte roser, der er symbol på det at være fange og som mange folk har i deres hjem, og romantiske malerier, der bliver solgt til turister i Moskva.

Det andet system, jeg mødte, er en slags landsbylejre. Disse ligger for det meste meget afsides. Vi besøgte en fire-fem stykker af dem ca. 600 km udenfor Krasnojarsk.

Vi havde lejet en bil, men 100 km før målet måtte man komme os til undsætning i lejrens jeep, fordi vi var kørt fast i muddet. Det tog omkring to dage at nå frem. I disse lejre er fangerne stadigvæk indkvarteret i barakker. Der er ikke engang nogen mur omkring lejren, fordi den ligger så fjernt fra den nærmeste by. De fanger, der kan overtale deres familier til at komme med, bor i huse for sig. Der er tale om egentlige landsbyer, da der også bor

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 possibility 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 like *mise en scène* 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, so in a way it was a double *mise en scène*.

First there was the choice of our guide who showed us the things he wanted us 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

andre folk der, folk der har startet små virksomheder. Der er en skole, der er børn. Selve lejren er ganske åben. Hovederhvervene er skovhugning og landbrug. Der ligger også nogen meget store landbrug med avl af kvæg, svin, høns og heste ligesom under det gamle sovjetsystem. Men de gårde jeg så – som trods alt var blevet valgt ud for at jeg skulle se dem – var i sørgelig forfatning. At komme til skovlejrene var som at besøge Bosnien under krigen: ødelagte traktorer alle vegne og maskiner, der ikke dur.

Den tredje type lejr fik jeg ikke tilladelse til at fotografere den sommer, fordi det var en anden general, der stod for dem. Undskyldningen (der måske er sand nok) lød, at der havde været en stor brand i en af lejrene, der havde også været oversvømmelser og en bro var i stykker. Det krævede en stor indsats langt om længe at få adgang til disse lejre om vinteren. Lejrene var fortrinsvis bygget af træ, som en slags cowboyfort, og lå langt ude i skoven. Alle træerne rundt omkring lejrene var dog blevet fældet, og da der er tale om mange træer, må de køre langt for at finde nye træer at fælde. Vilkaerne her var betydeligt hårdere end i fangelejrene i byen.

Jeg valgte at arbejde i farve. Jeg tror ikke, der var reel mulighed for at indfange forholdene, som de virkelig var. Det tror jeg i hvert fald ikke. Jeg var aldrig vidne til nogen rigtig barske situationer, som f.eks. tortur eller andre meget alvorlige situationer. Vi måtte aldrig fotografere om natten. Vi spurgte om lov adskillige gange, men den eneste gang, det skete, var, da der var kvindediskotek. Jeg valgte derfor at lege med, eftersom den oprindelige idé – der var den eneste grund til, at vi overhovedet fik lov til at fotografere – var at tage en positiv tilgang til de nye forhold i lejrene.

Jeg kunne faktisk virkelig godt lide den idé, fordi jeg ikke selv laver iscenesættelser – men hvis nogen gør det for mig, siger jeg aldrig nej tak. Min kollega havde den for mange russiske pressefotografer typiske stil med at opstille situationer. Enten stillede han noget op sammen med fangerne eller obersten og bodyguards stillede noget op sammen, så på en måde var det en slags dobbelt iscenesættelse.

Først valgte vores guide at vise os de ting, han ville have vi skulle se – selvom vi i de fleste lejre godt måtte åbne hver en dør, vi bad om. Så på sin vis viste de os alt, hvad vi ønskede at se, undtagen egentlige situationer. Det var noget, de kunne arrangere 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 lide når folk arbejdede eller var beskæftiget med noget, så de ikke bare stod og stirrede på kameraet, gjorde han det for os det meste af tiden. Han gik ind i cellen og sagde: "I bliver fotograferet, fortsæt med arbejdet". Hvis de ikke var i gang med noget, gav han dem bøger at læse i. Der blev også altid lagt en bibel på bordene rundt omkring, eller folk begyndte at gøre rent på deres værelse, spille bordtennis osv. Min kollega rokerede med selvfølgelighed rundt på folk, og jeg fotograferede ham, mens han gjorde det. Jeg iscenesatte aldrig selv nogen situationer. Jeg tror ikke, jeg har



I.K. 37 Sosnovobosk. Hospital ward



I.K. 31 Krasnoyarsk. No-ball tennis

could arrange as they wished. For instance, we came into a special cell, and there were three or four prisoners in that cell, and the colonel with us understood that I liked people working and doing things, not just standing there staring at the camera, so he did it for us, most of the time. He'd come into the cell and say "You're being photographed, and you keep on working" – even when they weren't doing anything, so they'd be given books to read. A Bible was always being put on a table somewhere, or they'd have to start cleaning their room, play ping pong or whatever. My colleague of course sometimes moved people around, and I took pictures while he was doing so. I never set up situations myself because I believe that my imagination is never big enough to create new events and natural events are always stronger than the ones you set up. But that's how it happened.

There was one episode that was very significant which you don't know about. I only saw one tennis court. I asked who it was for. The

fantasi nok til at skabe nye begivenheder, og naturlige begivenheder er under alle omstændigheder stærkere end dem, man selv sætter i scene. Men sådan foregik det altså.

Der var en episode, der var ret slående, som du ikke har hørt om. Jeg lagde mærke til, at der kun var en enkelt tennisbane, og spurgte, hvem den var til. Fangerne, sagde de. Så spurgte jeg, om jeg måtte se dem spille. Det slog dem lidt ud af den, men til sidst fandt de dog to fanger. Så skulle de finde to ketsjere til dem, hvilket tog yderligere en halv time. De virkede godt tilfredse med resultatet, indtil jeg spurgte, hvor boldene var, men selv efter endnu en times søgen kunne de ikke finde nogen. Så vi har altså denne absurde scene med mig, der lader som om jeg fotograferer to fanger, der lader som om de spiller tennis uden bold. Det var som en vanvittig mimescene. [...] Min kollega havde set *The Truman Show* i den lokale biograf i Krasnoyarsk, og det var sådan han refererede til de iscenesatte billeder fra lejrene. Alle lejrene har f.eks.

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 Krasnoyarsk, 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 set 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 three days to get in. There was no real explanation for why we had to wait, and finally we saw that most of the camp had 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 of 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 '60s. 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 seems amateurish. It looks quite easy to escape. But you can see in the faces of the prisoners that 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 recreation, but actually it's probably because machinery has broken down or something. But even in the camps where the machines are working, maybe it was all set up for us. I saw people playing football, volleyball, basketball all the time. And there were saunas after work. The food isn't great, but I tasted it many times, even in the restaurants for the prisoners, and the bread is high quality, though the soup isn't, and there's no meat.

et bibliotek med alle de russiske klassikere og også enkelte vestlige bøger. I hver eneste lejr ville de vise os biblioteket, fordi det sender et positivt signal, og hver gang satte de nogle fanger til at læse i bøgerne, også selvom nogle af dem vendte bogen på hovedet. [...]

Når vi ankom til en lejr, skete det undertiden, at vi måtte vente to-tre dage på at få lov til at komme indenfor. Der var ingen egentlig forklaring på, hvorfor vi skulle vente, men det endte altid med, at vi fik en nymalet lejr at se med fanger i nye uniformer osv. Undertiden vidste de ikke engang, at vi skulle komme. Det er ikke altid, tingene fungerer så godt – måske er telefonen eller faxen i uorden, og der er ikke noget internet. De var virkelig overraskede over at se os, især om vinteren. Til tider skabte det en smule panik, og vi måtte vente i timevis, men vi blev godt behandlet. Nogen gange kom der først en officer med en jeep og inviterede os ud på restaurant, andre gange blev vi indlogeret i byens bedste lejlighed, der var forbeholdt højtstående officerer, f.eks. når generaler kom på besøg. Vi led ikke ligefrem nogen nød.

Obersten, der var vores første bodyguard, prøvede altid at overbevise os om, hvor stor en indsats, der blev gjort for at bringe lejren op på vestligt niveau. Han gav os en masse statistikker, f.eks. om hvor lang tid folk sad inde for de forskellige forbrydelser. Han hævdede, at der ikke længere fandtes politiske fanger, men senere erfarede jeg dog, at det ikke er tilfældet og at antallet af politiske fanger er stigende, om end det ikke er i nærheden af, hvad det var i 1950'erne og 60'erne. Jeg kender en smule til fængselsituationen i USA og Europa. Der holdes fangerne som regel i isolerede celler med tre, fire, fem fanger i hver, og der er alle mulige bevogtningselementer – videokameraer, bevæbnede vagter osv. Her virker det amatøragtigt. Det ser ud til at være ret let at flygte. Men man kan se på fangernes øjne, at vagterne håndhæver en eller anden form for disciplin. Jeg vil tro, at straffen er ret hård, hvis der sker noget, men det oplevede jeg aldrig. Eftersom de fleste af lejrene er arbejdslejre, er der masser



I.K. 22 Tchournojar. Ice competition



I.K. 12 Novobirusinsk



I.K. 27 Krasnoyarsk. One cube of bread and a bowl of fish  
I.K. 22 Tchournojar. Boy's camp (14-18 years old). Lunchtime



I.K. 18 Krasnoyarsk. Frostbite: falling asleep after drinking vodka outside leads to amputation

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 really crazy. 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 a

af åbne områder, og der er altid en del fanger der går omkring. Så det virker som om de får masser af rekreation, men det er sikkert kun fordi maskinerne er brudt sammen eller noget lignende. Situationen er dog den samme i de lejre, hvor maskinerne virker, så måske var det bare noget, de iscenesatte for os. Jeg så hele tiden folk, der spillede fodbold, volleyball, basketball. Og der var sauna efter arbejdet. Maden er ikke noget at skrive hjem om, men jeg spiste da med flere gange også i fangernes kantiner, og brødet er af høj kvalitet, selvom suppen ikke er det, og der er ikke noget kød.

Men jeg fik en fornemmelse af frihed i disse lejre. Efter et stykke tid spurgte jeg mig selv, hvad der var bedst – at være fange dér eller et andet sted. Det var et helvede her i vinter, men om sommeren med alle farverne og folkene, der går omkring, måtte jeg tvinge mig selv til at huske på, at jeg virkelig befandt mig i en tidligere Gulag. Det er måske en stor fejl.

while I forgot about asking them to open this or that door, so I could discover something horrible. I abandoned the idea to reveal as much as possible. In many of my other books I try to use the system that people use to give an impression to the general public. That's what they were doing through me, showing how much had changed in the system. There's always some information, even if it's completely unreal, or even a big lie. There's still something that hangs in there, so people ask themselves, "Is this propaganda? Is this guy paid by the military?" And of course they remember and they try to combine the past and the present. In a way that's better than showing a few sensational pictures.

The chiefs would be really afraid to lose their jobs if they showed us sensational things. They kept things by the book, which explains something about the pictures I could take and not take – though things happened that even they couldn't foresee, like a prisoner walking by with no uniform. They weren't always prepared for what they would see behind the next door. We discovered that if we took the wrong picture, we very politely got kicked out, we just got very quickly directed towards the exit, and we got the last tea, and they said goodbye. Sasha [my Russian photographer colleague – ed.] didn't understand at first. But after a while he said, "It all has to do with the system. There are rules, the machines are supposed to work, every prisoner is supposed to have a good uniform even when they are working in high temperatures, they are supposed to use their uniforms." Of course they didn't wear their uniforms and so on, so we knew after a while that these simple things were really the most important ones. And if we did take a picture we had to know that this was really a good picture, so we waited until the end of the visit, because we could always ask to go back to a certain place. So we took the picture and got kicked out in many cases. It was a game and we knew what the rules were. And they knew after a while that we were playing with them and they were playing with us too. It got interesting.



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På et tidspunkt var der en konfrontation mellem mig og generalen, da vi besøgte fængselsbetjentenes olympiske lege. Det er en fire dage lang fest, hvor fængselspersonalet fra alle lejrene mødes i skoven med telte, øl – og vodka selvfølgelig. De tager konerne med og afholder mindre konkurrencer, lidt volleyball, lidt spydkast. Den lokale fjernsynsstation kom for at interviewe mig og generalen sammen, og jeg sagde, at hvis jeg havde valget mellem at sidde i en amerikansk eller en sibirisk arbejdslejr, ville jeg vælge den sibiriske. Mine venner sagde selvfølgelig til mig bagefter, at jeg måtte være sindssyg. Det viser bare, at jeg ikke vidste, hvordan situationen virkelig var, fordi jeg altid blev præsenteret for en slags teater. Efterhånden glemte jeg at bede dem om at åbne de forskellige døre, så jeg kunne opdage noget forfærdeligt. Jeg opgav tanken om at afsløre så meget som muligt. I flere af mine andre bøger prøver jeg at udnytte det system, folk bruger til at formidle indtryk til offentligheden. Det var det, de gjorde gennem mig, ved at vise mig hvor meget der havde forandret sig i systemet. Der er dog altid en vis grad af information til stede, selv når den er fuldstændig uvirkelig eller direkte løgn. Der er stadig noget, der hænger ved, der gør, at folk spørger sig selv: "Er det her propaganda? Er den her fyr på militærets lønningsliste?" Og naturligvis husker de og forsøger at sammenholde fortid og nutid. Det er på sin vis bedre end at vise nogle få sensationelle billeder.

Cheferne ville være alvorligt bange for at miste deres job, hvis de kom til at vise os noget sensationelt. De kørte det hele efter bogen, hvilket siger en del om, hvilke billeder jeg kunne tage eller ikke tage. Alligevel skete der ting, selv de ikke kunne have forudsagt, f.eks. at en fange kom gående uden uniform. De var ikke altid forberedt på, hvad der ville ske bag den næste dør. Vi opdagede, at vi meget høfligt blev smidt ud, hvis vi tog et forkert billede – de førte os simpelthen hurtigt i retning af døren, gav os den sidste te og sagde farvel. Sasha [min russiske fotografkollega – red.] forstod det ikke i begyndelsen. Men efter et stykke tid sagde han: "Det har alt sammen noget med systemet at gøre. Der er visse regler. Det er meningen, at maskinerne skal virke. Det er meningen, at alle fangerne skal have en god uniform. Selv når de arbejder i høje temperaturer, er det meningen, at de skal bruge deres uniform". Selvfølgelig havde de ikke altid deres uniform på osv., og efterhånden lærte vi, at disse simple ting i virkeligheden er de vigtigste. Så hvis vi ville tage et billede, vi vidste var et virkelig godt billede, måtte vi vente vi til sidst på besøget, da vi altid kunne bede om at komme tilbage til de forskellige steder. Når vi så tog billedet, blev vi som regel smidt ud. Det var et spil, og vi vidste hvad reglerne var. Og efterhånden blev de klar over, at vi kørte et spil med dem og at de også kørte et spil med os. Det blev ret interessant.