

Saint Luke the Surgeon, Archbishop of the Crimea (1877-1961) - Part II (Nectarios (Antonopoulos) of Sagmata)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



It was also in the '20s that the “correction” facilities were set up, the forced labour camps known as gulags. Within a few years they had spread throughout the vast country. It all began with a monastery, the Solovetstky, which was built in the 14th century on the Solovetsky Islands in the White Sea. It was a large monastic centre, a central monastery with lots of sketes throughout the islands. It was bitterly cold in the winter, which lasted 8-9 months. Since it was impossible to escape from, the Solovetsky monastery was an ideal location for a prison camp.



The inmates worked 16 hours a day, and if their productivity was not up to scratch they were executed as saboteurs. If they wanted to punish someone, they sent them to the skete on the steep hill of Sekirnaya Gora (“Hatchet Mountain”). They took away their clothes and tortured them while they were naked in the snow and

ice. Their only food was a soup of rotten potatoes, once a day. When, after some months, the inmates were completely exhausted, they took them to the edge of the hill, where there were wooden stairs with 365 steps. They tied them to barrels and pushed them onto the stairs, where they met a tragic death. There were so many dead that a tree formed the sign of the Cross with its branches.

All the other labour camps followed from Solovetsky. The inmates worked as slaves and died in untold numbers from torture, sickness and the miserable conditions.

At the same time, a merciless war was unleashed against the Church. **Through a series of legislative acts, the Church was bound in chains. Very many churches and monuments to art were closed, blown up, turned into gymnasiums, barracks, or centres of entertainment. Icons were consigned to the fire. Churches were pillaged and the relics of saints desecrated.**

Three hours away from Saint Petersburg lies the Monastery of Alexander Svirsky, built near the River Svir. Saint Alexander was a great figure who was found worthy to see the Holy Trinity and when he fell asleep in the Lord, his relics remained incorrupt.

In 1918, the revolutionaries entered the monastery and executed all the monks. Then they took the relics of Saint Alexander and threw them into a fire. But they did not burn. They then took them to a museum for mummies in Saint Petersburg. In 1997 the monastery opened again and the fathers asked to have the holy relics back. The curator of the museum, however, refused to allow this, because he considered them to be a mummy. **The fathers insisted and the curator fetched X-ray equipment. They took an X-ray of the body of the saint and discovered that it was not embalmed, but incorrupt. They were therefore forced to give the relics to the fathers and the saint returned home.**

The people of Russia frequently displayed a heroic outlook in their defence of the churches. I shall mention only one, moving case. In the town of Olonets, in 1927, they went to demolish a church. A young woman, about 25 years of age, heard what was about to happen, ran to the church and shouted to the workers: "Pull down the church and kill me". The workers waited for her to leave, because they did not want to kill her. In the end, they left after a few days. And the girl stayed to guard the church for 25 years. She swept it, looked after it and people brought her food. The church was saved. At the end of her life she became a nun and took the

name Varvara. She departed this life at the age of 96 and was buried next to the church. Everyone there reveres her as a saint.

Among the victims were clergymen and monks. **Throughout Russia, in 1922 alone, a total of 8,100 clergymen and monks were executed.** In St. Petersburg more than 40 fathers of the Alexander Nevsky Monastery were shot against a wall. **One Sunday, again in Saint Petersburg, they arrested 40 priests at the time they were celebrating the liturgy. They took them to the Smolensk Cemetery, near the grave of Saint Xenia. They gave them tools and told them to dig a large hole. Then they threw them in and buried them alive.** So the blood of the new martyrs was spilt abundantly and the Church of Russia can boast of the multitude of its new holy martyrs.

Let us return, though, to Tashkent. It was at this difficult time that Valentin elected to be ordained as a priest. New responsibilities awaited him. Archbishop Innokenti was removed in 1923 and the people's choice to succeed him was Fr. Valentin. He humbly accepted the new call from God, though he was well aware of the dangers. There was an exiled bishop in Tashkent at that time and it was he who initially tonsured him a monk. Because there was no church, the tonsure took place in his children's bedroom. There he made his monastic vows and had his name changed from Valentin to Luke. Since the bishop could not consecrate him by himself, he suggested that Fr. Luke go to Penjikent, where there were two other bishops in exile. He left at night and crossed Uzbekistan as best he could, though exposed to many dangers. His first stop was Samarkand. From there onwards, things became even more dangerous because of brigands. It was with the greatest difficulty that he was able to continue into Tajikistan. In the town of Penjikent, he found the two bishops who consecrated him hierarch in all secrecy, at night. It was May 31, 1923, and Bishop Luke then returned to Tashkent.

His consecration brought new turmoil to Tashkent. The Party people began to spread false stories about him and to undermine him through the press. It was not long before he was arrested, on Saturday, 9 June, 1923 and taken off to Tashkent Gaol. Thus began 11 years of imprisonment and exile. He remained in prison for two months and was then sent to Moscow, where he twice visited the much-tribed Patriarch Tikhon, who was under house arrest at the Donskoy Monastery. Patriarch Tikhon urged him not to give up his medical and surgical activities, because they were a way of helping people. Having borne the heavy weight of the persecutions, Patriarch Tikhon fell asleep in the Lord on 25 March, 1925. His last words were very prophetic: **“The night will be very dark and very long”**. Recently he has been canonized.

A week later, Bishop Luke presented himself at the dread Lyubianka, the CHEKA-KGB building. There he was interrogated with the harsh methods employed by the investigators there, with a lamp shining in his face. Millions of people were cross-examined and condemned in that building, while many were taken down to the basement and executed with a bullet to the nape of the neck.

After his interrogation and conviction he was put into a notorious “Black Raven”, the “Black Maria” of the CHEKA. These “Black Ravens” brought fear and trembling to the Russians of the time. They transported those under arrest and were always full. Many prisoners died of asphyxiation. Bishop Luke was taken to the worst prison in Moscow, the Butyrka. The cells were vastly overcrowded. Most prisoners slept on the freezing floor. The blinds on the windows were closed. An electric light burned the whole time so the inmates never knew whether it was day or night. Sleep was a real trial. There wasn’t enough room for them all on the floor and if they wanted to turn over, they had to co-ordinate with others. And there might have been as many as 30-40 people in a room meant for six. It was in this prison that the saint first noticed signs of the heart complaint that was to worsen in exile and accompany him for the rest of his life.

Two months later, they brought him and other prisoners on foot to Taganka Prison. One day he was given a fur coat by the Red Cross, but he did not keep it for long. He gave it to a young inmate who was shivering with cold.

In 1923, despite the terrible cold and the fact that he was ill, he was sent into exile in Siberia. The journey by train lasted a month. They were fed half a herring, a piece of bread and a glass of water a day. The compartments on the train were no different from the cells at the prison. They, too, were full of prisoners, with one stealing from another.

After a month they arrived in the town of Krasnoyarsk in the heart of Siberia. They then exiled him to the town of Yeniseisk, 430 kilometres to the north. The journey took place in the dark hold of a ship, which today is a museum. They arrived in Yeniseisk in the depths of winter. His lodgings were somewhat more humane here: a room in the house of a prosperous resident. There were two other priests with him and the house was turned into a church and a surgery for when he was visited by the sick.

A short time later he sought hospital work in Yeniseisk. The doctors were surprised but very pleased that they would have a famous surgeon with them. They gave him permission and he began to operate. Here, too, the need was great. Waiting lists were as long as two months. In 1924, he attempted a pioneering and extremely difficult operation: they brought a man to him who was suffering from severe renal failure and Bishop Luke carried out the first successful transplant in the world of a kidney from an animal to a human.

As a reward, the local authorities sent him even further away, to a more or less forgotten village, Khagia, where there were only eight houses and which was cut off by the snow. Despite the difficulties and the very few means available to him he continued to operate. Indeed, among other operations was a very successful one he performed for a cataract. We should note that he sterilized his instruments in a... samovar.

In the summer, they brought him back to Yeniseisk. The bishop was housed in the isolation section of the prison which was alive with bugs which gave him no peace. They then let him out and he was able to operate and celebrate the liturgy in an old monastery in Yeniseisk.

He operated non-stop and the residents of the town loved him greatly. **But the more their love for him increased, the greater was the hatred of the authorities towards him.** So they decided to send him to the frozen north. At the landing stage in Yeniseisk, they pitched him onto a barge and he travelled about 2,000 kilometres north along the River Yenisei. The journey was endless, monotonous, boring, tiring and very trying. There was hardly any food. Rather, the

prisoners had themselves become food for the lice.

At some stage they arrived in the town of Turukhansk. The climatic conditions made life unbearable here. The winter was dark and endless. Everything was frozen. During the short summer, clouds of mosquitoes made life a real trial for the inhabitants. Bishop Luke worked in a small hospital. There was no other doctor and no proper facilities. All he found were a bottle of alcohol and a knife. He operated with these and stitched the wounds with hair from the patients.

We might pause for another parenthesis here. At that time, millions of prisoners were taken to the tundra, in the frozen north. Here, the snows never really melt, even in the summer, which lasts 2-3 weeks. The prisoners had to build new townships from scratch, construct factories, roads, railways to nowhere. Temperatures fell to -60 and when it was windy the situation became unbearable. The prisoners died like flies. The place was littered with the corpses of the condemned. To this day, when the snows melt and water runs, human bones are brought up from the ground in the mountains, where the mines were. There were so many dead, it is impossible to calculate their numbers. In the town of Norilsk, which was built in the 1930s by prisoners, there has been created the “Norilsk Golgotha”, with lots of crosses and memorials to various nationalities, to remind us of the martyrdom of so many people. In the surrounding towns, too, there are small museums which take us back to that tragic time.

This was roughly the route that Bishop Luke took. The journey of over 400 kilometres had to be made by sledge. It was a painful journey, in the heart of winter. The cold was terrible. The darkness oppressive. First stop was Selivanikha, a small village, and the journey then continued on the River Yenesei. They crossed into the Arctic Circle and arrived at the village of Plakhino, which had fifteen inhabitants. They gave him a room in a wooden hut surrounded by ice. It was so cold that birds could not live there. The small wood stove was inadequate and the water in the bucket froze. When the wind got up, conditions became hopeless. He remained in Plakhino about two and a half months and it was only the grace of God that kept him alive.

In March, the director of CHEKA sent the sledge again to fetch him back. In Turukhansk someone had died from lack of medical care. People were up in arms and demanded the return of the bishop-physician. So he found himself back in Turukhansk and continued his work in the hospital and the monastery without interference.

The date had almost arrived when his sentence would be served and he awaited it

in anxiety. He watched the river boats sail away with prisoners but his name was never called. At the end of August, the boat service ceased operations because the river would ice over and he had to wait until the following summer. In the end, they freed him in November, 1925. Now he had to travel by sledge on the frozen River Yenesei, a difficult and dangerous journey. In total he covered more than 2,000 kilometres. He reached Krasnoyarsk and embarked on a train to Tashkent.

He again took up his Episcopal duties. They would not give him a position at the university, so he received patients at his home. A lot of young people gathered around him and he helped them in a paternal manner, while they assisted him in his work. They went around looking for people who were poor and sick and told him about them. People loved him very much.

It was not long before new problems presented themselves. A certain mentally unstable professor committed suicide. The authorities called it murder and Bishop Luke was accused of being complicit. **For a whole year they spread lies about him in the press. Plays were even written about the bishop/murderer. Finally, in 1930, they arrested him. Back to the prison in Tashkent, back to the harsh cross-examinations, the threats, the blackmail. In vain everyone defended his innocence. He remained in Tashkent Prison for a whole year and was then sentenced to exile in Northern Russia. They took him to the railway station and their behaviour towards him was inhumane. A woman who was present later related: "Lots of people had gathered... We saw him from a distance. They were dragging him by his beard, as if he was some kind of miscreant. They spat in his face. It came to me in a flash that that was exactly the same way that Jesus Christ Himself was mocked".**

He himself wrote of the train journey: "There were so many lice that every morning and evening I had to take my clothes off and there were hundreds of them in there, every day. In among them there were some enormous black ones, the like of which I had never seen before".

A good many days later they arrived at the town of Kotla. This had also been built in the vast forests by prisoners, many of whom had died martyrs' deaths. Bishop Luke was initially taken to the prison in Kotla and then three kilometres further on to Makarikha. They lived in wretched, roughly-built shacks. They were forced to sleep in the open where they had to deal with the cold and damp. Many committed suicide. At that time an epidemic of typhus and other diseases broke out in

Makarikha. The inmates died without being given any attention. Every day, they dug a large pit and would bury about 70 bodies. Today, lots of memorials have been erected in Makarikha to recall the tragedy of those people.

Bishop Luke watched this drama, the hecatombs of the dead, unable to offer anything. Soon afterwards he was taken to the hospital in Kotla, and allowed to operate, because the needs were so pressing. It was not long before he was moved again, this time by river boat down the Dvina to Archangelsk. This is one of the northernmost cities in Russia and, because they had sent thousands of prisoners there, Bishop Luke was pressed to find a house. The exiles shivered on the streets because there were not enough houses to go round. He finally found a room in a large house where other exiles were living. The authorities allowed him to operate at the hospital but he had to face the jealousy of his colleagues. He attended church in the cemetery chapel, but here, too, he was viewed with suspicion.