

SIBERIA AND THE EXILE SYSTEM

CHAPTER I

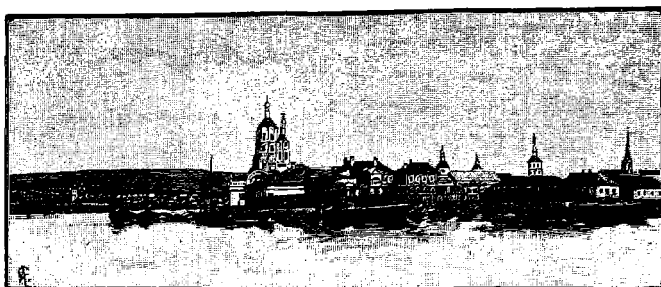
PRISONS AND EXILES IN IRKÚTSK

IT was so late when we reached Irkútsk Sunday afternoon, and we were so tired from our thousand-mile ride, that we did not attempt to do anything except bathe, change our clothing, dine, and go to bed. Monday, after we had sent our passports to the police-station, Mr. Frost strolled down to the river-side to make some sketches, while I went out to look at the city and find, if possible, a certain political exile to whom I had a letter of introduction.

Irkútsk is situated on the right, or northern, bank of the Angará, about forty miles from the point where that navigable river flows out of Lake Baikál. At the time of our visit it had a population of 36,000, and was therefore the largest city in Siberia. It contained an excellent weekly newspaper,¹ a public library, a branch of the Imperial Geographical Society, a good theater, and about thirty public schools, and the business of its merchants, traders, and manufacturers amounted annually to more than 11,000,000 *rúbles*. The city had not yet recovered from the great fire of July, 1879, which destroyed nearly 4000 buildings, rendered homeless 15,000 people, and consumed property valued

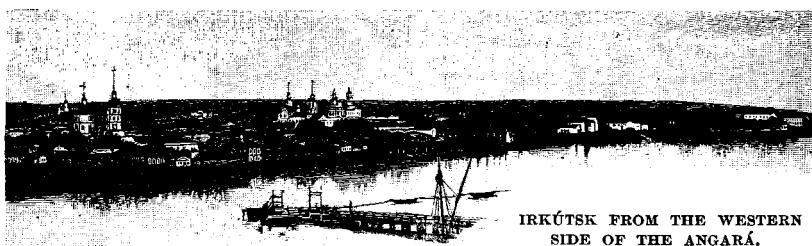
¹ The *Sibór*, edited by Mr. M. V. Zagóskin. After a long struggle with the press censorship, this enterprising and ably conducted newspaper has finally been suppressed.

at 20,000,000 *rúbles*. Traces of this fire were still to be seen in many parts of the city, and even where such traces were not visible the streets and buildings had a raggedness and newness that suggested a rapidly growing frontier mining



EXTENSION OF VIEW BELOW.

town rather than a city founded in 1652. Generally speaking, it seemed to me a much less interesting and attractive place than when I saw it first in 1867. One of the most curious, and apparently one of the oldest, buildings spared by the fire was a massive stone powder-magazine, which stood on the outskirts of the open-air bazaar in the midst of



IRKÚTSK FROM THE WESTERN
 SIDE OF THE ANGARÁ.

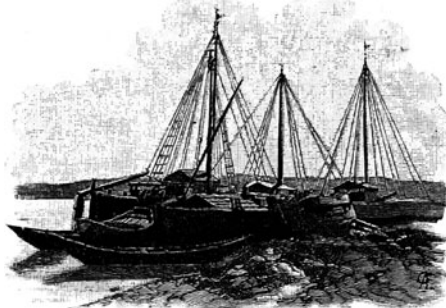
the lower half of the city.

Its roof was overgrown with grass and weeds; its sides were incrustated with the barnacle-like stalls and booths of retail traders, and around it, during all the busy hours of the day, surged a throng of Buriáts, Mongols, Cossacks, and Russian peasants, who seemed to be buying or bargaining for all sorts of mer-

chandise, from a *tárantás* or a *teléga* to a second-hand pair of boots.

After exploring the bazar, rambling about the city for two or three hours, and delivering some of my letters of introduction, I returned to the hotel. Zhan, with a perturbed countenance, met me in the hall and informed me that the chief of police had just been there after us and had left a verbal request

that we call upon him at once. Zhan's experience of life had evidently convinced him that a visit from the chief of police, like the appearance of a stormy petrel at sea, was a threatening phenomenon; and although he asked no questions, he looked at me with



BOATS ON THE ANGARÁ.

some bewilderment and anxiety. Upon going to our room I found two cards bearing the name of Christopher Fómich Makófski, the Irkútsk chief of police, a gentleman with whom we were destined to become somewhat intimately acquainted, and an officer who had been connected with one of the ghastliest tragedies in the recent history of political exile—the hunger strike in the Irkútsk prison. So far as I could remember, there had been nothing suspicious in our movements since our arrival in Irkútsk, and I was at a loss to know why we were so soon “wanted”; but I had always made it a rule in Russia to obey promptly the first summons of the police, and in less than ten minutes Mr. Frost and I were on our way to Captain Makófski's house. Learning that he was not at home, we left cards and drove to the central police-station. He was not there. Having thus done all that we could, we returned to the hotel, and Mr. Frost went out again to sketch the old powder-magazine shown

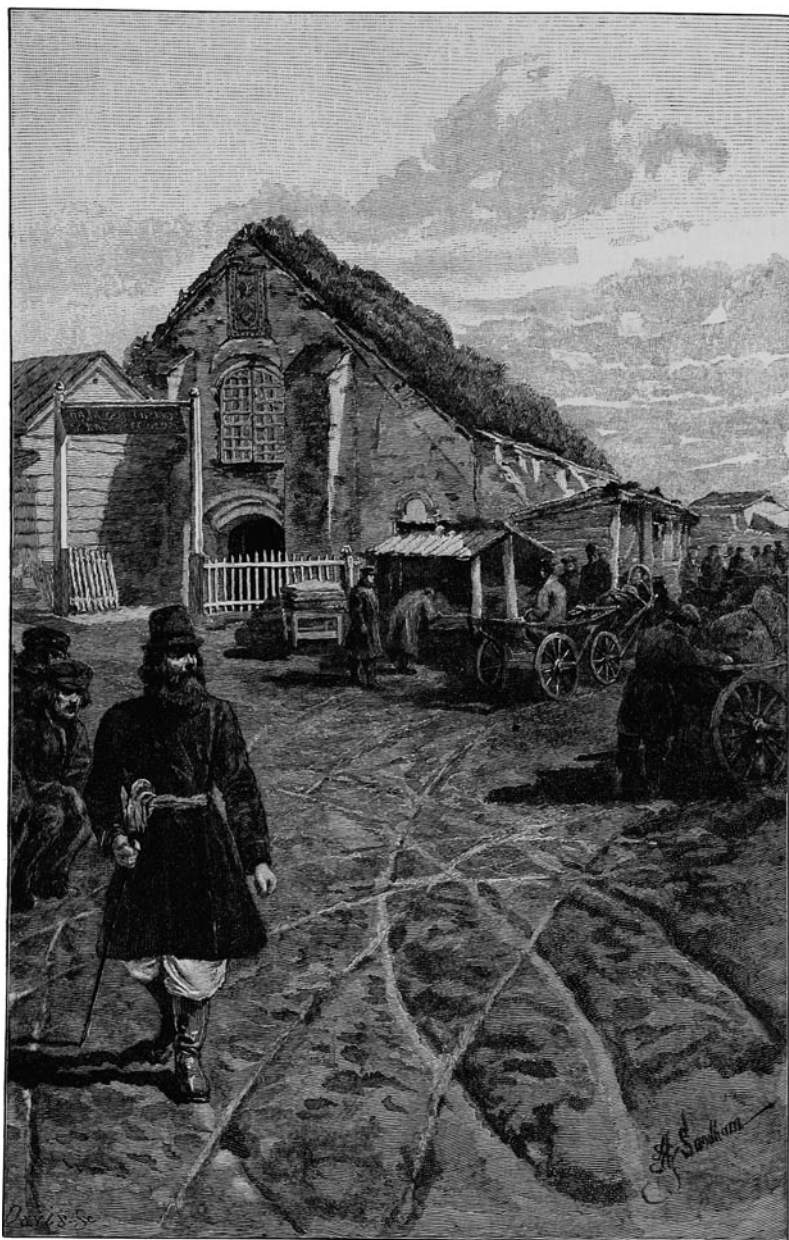
in the illustration on the opposite page. Half an hour later Zhan appeared with a dejected air, holding gingerly between his fingers another card of the chief of police, who, he said, was waiting in the corridor and wished to see us. This second call within two hours surprised me a little, but of course I told Zhan to show the chief of police in. I heard quick footsteps and the jingle of spurs in the hall, and in another instant Captain Makófski, in full uniform, entered the room. I was prepared for something unpleasant, and rose from my chair fully expecting to meet a man with a stern official face who would look at me suspiciously and either tell me that there was something wrong with my passport, or else inquire how long and for what purpose I had been looking up political exiles. Imagine my surprise to see a rather handsome officer of middle age, with good features, blue eyes, closely cut hair, and a full brown beard, who advanced to meet me with outstretched hand, and whose face fairly beamed with smiling cordiality as he said: "I am Makófski, the chief of police. I have the pleasure of knowing you by reputation,—I have read your book,—and when an eminent foreign traveler comes to Siberia to study the country, I regard it as only my duty to call upon him and offer my services."

I was so nearly paralyzed with astonishment at this wholly unexpected greeting that for a moment I could hardly reply; but I managed to thank him and ask him to take a seat. We had a pleasant chat of ten minutes with regard to the roads, the weather, our Siberian experiences, the changed appearance of Irkútsk, etc., and then Captain Makófski said: "I understand that you are interested, among other things, in prisons and the exile system. I think you will find the city prison here in good condition. I will send some one to show you through it, and I will not forewarn the prison officers that you are coming—you shall see it just as it is every day."

"This," I said to myself, "is the kind of chief of police that every well-regulated Siberian city ought to have."

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-04823-1 - Siberia and the Exile System: Volume 2
George Kennan
Excerpt
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PRISONS AND EXILES IN IRKÚTSK



OLD POWDER-MAGAZINE AND BAZAR, IRKÚTSK.

In the general discussion of the exile system which followed, Captain Makófski admitted that it was a great burden to the country and an evil thing in itself, but he said that there did not seem to be any prospect of its speedy abolition.

“The chief difficulty in the way,” he said, “is the financial difficulty. The adoption of a central prison system in European Russia in place of the exile system has been suggested and discussed, but the change would necessitate the building of twenty large new prisons at a cost of about ten million *rúbles*, and the financial condition of the country is such as to render this impracticable.”

While we were talking Mr. Frost came in, and after some further general conversation the chief of police took his leave, urging us to call upon him informally and soon. I could not at this interview fully make up my mind with regard to his character and motives. He seemed to be everything that was amiable; but there was a suggestion of surface artificiality about his beaming smile and a touch of exaggeration in his complimentary deference which suggested diplomacy rather than perfect sincerity. I felt, however, that I had no right on this ground to throw stones at anybody, since I myself was living in a very large and very fragile glass house.

On Wednesday we returned Captain Makófski's call, and Thursday afternoon he came to our hotel to escort us to the prisons. The general city prison and the forwarding prison of Irkútsk are situated side by side a little out of the busy part of the city, from which they are separated by a small shallow stream called the Ushakófska. The forwarding prison, which at Captain Makófski's suggestion we visited first, proved to be nothing more than a large but old and half-decayed *étape*, varying from the usual roadside type of such buildings only in size and in the arrangement of its *kámeras*. One could see at a glance that it was in very bad repair. The logs in some places had rotted almost entirely

away; the stockade around the courtyard looked old and weather-beaten; and in almost every window one or more panes of glass had been broken out and the holes had been stopped with rags, old clothes, or pieces of coarse dirty matting. Captain Makófski, observing that I noticed these things, said in explanation of them that it had not been thought best to make extensive repairs, because there was a plan under consideration for the erection of a new building.¹ As we entered the main corridor the officer of the day sprang hastily to the door, saluted the warden, who was with us, and in a sort of rapid, monotonous recitative said, without once taking breath, “Your-High-Nobility-I-have-the-honor-to-report-that-the-condition-of-the-Irkútsk-forwarding-prison-on-this-the-fifth-day-of-September-1885-is-blagopoluchno [prosperous or satisfactory] and-that-it-now-contains-271-prisoners.” The warden nodded his head, said “All right,” and we began our inspection of the prison. It seemed to me an extremely dreary, gloomy, and neglected place. Its *kámeras* did not differ essentially from those in the forwarding prison of Tomsk, except that they were less crowded. Most of them were fairly well lighted, they were warmed by large square brick ovens, and they contained no furniture except low plank sleeping-platforms of the usual type. The prisoners had no bedding except their overcoats, and in a few cases small thin “crazy quilts” about two feet wide and six feet long, which they had evidently made for themselves out of countless hoarded rags and scraps of cloth, and which they used to spread down upon and thus soften a little the hard planks of the *nári*. I did not see a blanket nor a pillow in the prison. The *kámeras* contained from twenty to forty men each, and the heavy foulness of the air showed that there was little or no ventilation. The floors, judged by Siberian standards, were not disgracefully dirty, but they had been freshly sprinkled with white sand

¹ Three years later a new forwarding prison, intended to take the place of this, was erected in the village of Alex-ándrofsk, a short distance north of Irkútsk. (See Appendix G.)

in evident anticipation of our visit. Throughout the prison the men seemed to be wholly separated from the women and children, and in the *kámeras* devoted to the latter there was less overcrowding, more cleanliness, and purer air.

From the forwarding prison we went to the general city prison, which stood about a hundred yards away on the same street, and which consisted of a large two-story building of brick covered with white stucco and roofed with tin. In general type it resembled a little the forwarding prison of Tiúmén; but it differed from the latter in having an interior courtyard 75 or 100 feet square which, by means of graveled walks and prim geometrical flowerbeds, had been turned into a sort of garden and which served as a place of exercise for the inmates. This prison was erected in 1861 at a cost of 62,000 *rúbles*, and was intended to accommodate 450 prisoners. At the time of our visit it held 743, and the warden admitted to me that it sometimes contained 1500. According to Mr. S. S. Popóf, who made a special study of this prison and who wrote a monograph upon it for the newspaper *Sibir*, no less than 2000 prisoners have at times been packed into its *kámeras*. In other words, every cell has been made to hold more than four times the number of prisoners for which it was intended.¹ The results of such overcrowding I have already described several times in my sketches of other Siberian prisons. The air in the *kámeras* was somewhat less poisonous than in the forwarding prison of Tiúmén, but it was nevertheless very foul, and many piteous complaints of it were made by the prisoners, both to Captain Makófski and to me, as we passed through the cells. The condition of the atmosphere in the overcrowded and badly ventilated hospital seemed to me to be something terrible. Although we went through only two or three wards, and that hastily, and although I held my breath

¹ "The Prisoners of the Irkútsk Prison Castle, and their Maintenance," by S. S. Popóf, Annual of the newspaper *Sibir*, p. 210. Irkútsk, 1876.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-04823-1 - Siberia and the Exile System: Volume 2

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almost to the point of suffocation rather than take such terribly polluted air into my lungs, I came out feeling faint, sick, and giddy.¹

The prevalent diseases here, as in other Siberian prisons, were typhus fever, scurvy, anemia, rheumatism, and bronchitis—all of them disorders pointing to unfavorable sanitary conditions.

From the hospital we crossed the little interior garden to the so-called “secret” or solitary-confinement cells, where the chief of police said there was one political prisoner with whom he would allow me to talk. I had already heard much of the prison life of the Russian revolutionists, but I had not as yet seen a single one actually in solitary confinement. Entering a sort of hall at one corner of the courtyard, Captain Makófski, accompanied by a turnkey, preceded us through a locked and grated door into a long, narrow corridor, where an armed sentry was pacing back and forth in front of a row of cells. The heavy wooden doors of these cells were secured by padlocks, and in the middle of every one was a small square aperture through which food could be passed and the prisoner be watched by the guard. The name of the political offender whom we were about to visit was Ferdinand Liústig,—formerly an army officer, Captain Makófski thought,—who had been arrested in St. Petersburg in March, 1881, soon after the assassination of the late Tsar. He had been tried as a revolutionist, had been sentenced to four years of penal servitude, had finished his term, and was on his way from the mines of Kará to some place in Eastern Siberia, where he was to be settled as a forced colonist.

The turnkey unlocked and threw open a door marked “No. 6,” and we stepped into a long but narrow and gloomy cell, where a good-looking young man with closely cut hair, blue eyes, and a full brown beard was sitting in a dejected attitude upon a small wooden bed. He rose hastily when

¹ See statements with regard to this prison in Appendix G.

we entered, as if he were anticipating some change in his fortunes, and Captain Makófski, with an air of hearty good-fellowship, exclaimed: "Good afternoon, Mr. Liústig! We have come to cheer you up a little. These are American travelers who have been looking through the prison, and I thought that perhaps you would like to see them." The transient expression of hope and expectancy in the young man's face slowly faded as he shook hands with us, and his manner became nervous and embarrassed, as if he had been isolated so long from all human society that he hardly knew how to talk or what to say. The situation was an awkward one, even for me, on account of the presence of Captain Makófski, the turnkey, and a soldier. If Mr. Liústig and I had been alone together, we should soon have come to an understanding and should undoubtedly have talked for hours; but under existing circumstances I could say nothing that I wished to say, and felt conscious that I must appear to him like a mere tourist, who had come to look at a "nihilist" in prison, as one might look at a new species of wild animal in a zoölogical garden. The cell occupied by Mr. Liústig was about 20 feet long by 6 feet wide and 12 feet high. It was lighted by one very small barred window in the end wall opposite the door. This window, which was so high that I could not reach it, would have opened upon the little garden in the courtyard, had not a high stockade been erected in front of it at a distance of a few feet. The stockade hid not only the whole outside world, but even the sky, so that Mr. Liústig could hardly tell, by looking up at his little window, whether the weather was clear or stormy—whether it was winter or summer. Although the walls and ceiling had been whitewashed, the cell was dark and gloomy, and it seemed to me, moreover, to be very cold. It contained no furniture except a small wooden bedstead covered with a thin gray blanket, and a square box in which there was a pail or bucket for excrement. The prisoner was not allowed to have chair, table,