Anton Pavlovič Čechov's Journey to the Penitentiary Island of Sakhalin in 1890: An Early and Personal Interpretation and Practical Application of Red Cross Ideas

Jürg Kesselring

Department of Neurology and Neurorehabilitation, Rehabilitation Center, Valens, Switzerland

For the 150th anniversary of the ICRC. English translations of quotations from German, French and Russian texts by J.K.

Title page of Čechov's original publication.

Preface

Missions with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) are confidential. Details about activities are not published. As a member of this organization I am not entitled to break this rule. In order to be able to transmit, nevertheless, some of the very personal impressions which I have gained by order and in execution of Red Cross ideas, they are disguised in this article. And what better way of veiling my own confidential experiences

than through the language and experience of a doctor and author like Anton Pavlovič Čechov, in whose work and biography I have been interested for many years. The idea of putting my own thoughts into a foreign language has always fascinated me – to create reality out of the unfamiliar, much like with a photograph, which is transforming reality twice and thereby renders it clearer. Against the reproach of plagiarism I find myself secured with Blaise Pascal and Egon Friedell:

Some readers want that an author never speaks of things of which others have spoken. If he does, they accuse him of not saying anything new. In a ball game one uses exactly the same ball as the other person; but some throw it better. One could accuse an author just as well of using old words: as if the same thoughts did not form another spiritual organism in varied arrangements, just as words form other thoughts in changed arrangements. The unoriginality mostly just stays with the reader. [1]

Thus, what is left to me is only to outline what may be announced in public according to the ICRC rules, and then to let Čechov say the rest.

Introduction

Visiting prisoners, talking with them under exclusion of witnesses, describing the conditions of their imprisonment and attempting to improve these conditions by negotiation with responsible authorities are some of the important activities which delegates of the ICRC conduct today in many countries of the world. Their reports remain confidential and, therefore, find little echo and consideration in public.

With quite similar goals and methods, not carried by an organization but rather on his own initiative, in 1890 the great Russian author Anton Pavlovič Čechov (1860–1904) undertook a journey to the prisoner's island of Sakhalin in the Sea of Okhotsk, east of Siberia [2–8]. His report, which he would write and publish in Russia as a book titled *Sachalin's Island* in 1895 [9], offers incomparable and illustrative material for this kind of activity, which today as then is met with incomprehension [10]. Therefore, one should look at his report to seek out what might have motivated him to embark on such an enterprise, and how he processed his impressions.

Motivation

If nowadays a young doctor decides to make a visit for the ICRC in a distant part of the world in the hope of improving prison conditions, he can probably hardly expect a lot of understanding in his new surroundings. Warnings are issued, the uselessness of such an enterprise is prophesied, and reasons for his motivation are set out: escape from a failed relationship, lack of success in everyday professional life, a craving for admiration, longing for adventure.

Čechov too had listened to these reproaches; afterwards they sometimes entered into the interpretation of

his biographers [2–8]. One of them [11] claims that he wanted to flee from Lidija Avilova, with whom – according to her account and interpretation [12] – he had been in love. Most biographers of Čechov, however, do not think that this story was the reason for his departure to Sakhalin. If it were not for the impossibility of a closer relationship with this married woman and author, he would hardly have undertaken such an arduous trip. His sense of duty, which, at this time, was still strongly affected by Tolstoy's moral philosophy, would have forbidden it. And, indeed, we find a hint in later letters to her that he was not really interested in her personally very much at that time, 'since at that time I was hardly acquainted with you and had forgotten your husband, Avilova, I threw the letter away' ([13]; March 19, 1892, to Lidija Avilova, Letters I).

One cannot say that he was a professional failure; he was well known as an author, above all as an author of short stories and novellas, and of some dramas he had written. He had won the Pushkin price and had also practiced as a doctor over and over again. He wanted to pay tribute to medicine, which in a letter of September 18, 1888, to his brother Alexander he had called 'my legal woman (the literature only as "my lover")', to which, as you know, I am a pig' [13]. Čechov used the same argument and expression in a letter ([13]; March 9, 1890) to A.S. Suvorin: 'I just want to write one or two hundred pages and pay my debt to medicine, towards which, you know, I behave like a pig'. After finishing his studies in Moscow on September 15, 1884, he was beginning to write a thesis on the history of medicine in Russia. However, he dropped the project after engaging in detailed literary studies because he was occupied otherwise too much. Probably the wish to present an academically flawless work and thereby obtain a lectureship at the medical faculty may have been an additional motivation for his trip ([13]; March 19, 1890, to A.S. Suvorin, Letters I). Čechov had read a few texts on criminal law, on which his brother Mikhail worked, and found that he had been revolted by the fate of the deportees.

Before his departure, he had already allayed the suspicion that he was going to Siberia in order to share in the glory won by some of the returnees to Russia, such as Dostoyevsky or Korolenko. He explained in a letter to the writer I.L. Leontjev-Ščeglov: '[...] please do not waste any literary hopes on my journey to Sakhalin. I am not going for the sake of observations and impressions, but just in order to live for half a year in a way I have never lived before' ([13]; March 16, 1890, Letters II, p. 114). Even to his

publisher, A.S. Suvorin, he had written in a similar vein on March 9, 1890: 'I am travelling in the firm conviction that my journey is not going to provide any valuable contribution either to literature or to science: neither my knowledge nor my time nor my ambition would allow this [...] Maybe I will not even be able to write anything at all, but nonetheless this trip does not lose its charm for me: as I will read, look and listen around, and thereby I will learn many things' ([13]; March 9, 1890, Letters II, p. 108).

In this letter, which is a response to Suvorin's accusation that he was capricious and going on a whim and that Sakhalin would be in no one's interest, a positive motivation becomes clear which cannot be labeled with a slogan. In this letter his motivation is explained. Whereas in the figure of doctor Astrov, in the drama *Uncle Vanya*, it was dramatized, it was acted out in his daily life as a physician by Čechov himself.

Maybe my journey will be a bagatelle, stubbornness, a temper, but tell me what I lose even if I go? Time? Money? I shall suffer deprivation? My time is free, money I never have anyway, and in terms of deprivation, I will travel for 25–30 days in horse-drawn wagons, no more, and the rest of the time I will sit on the deck of a steamer or in the room and constantly bombard you with letters. Maybe this trip is no use, but will there, during the whole trip, really not be the 2–3 days that I will remember all my life with passion or bitterness? etc., etc. That is the way it is, my lord. All this is not very convincing, but yet your writing is at least as unpersuasive. For example, you write that nobody needs Sakhalin and it is also of interest to no one. Should that be true? Only a society which does not send thousands of people there and does not spend millions on them can find Sakhalin unnecessary and uninteresting. Apart from Australia in the past and Cayenne, Sakhalin is the only place where you can study colonization by criminals. The whole of Europe is very interested in it and we do not need it? No more than 25–30 years ago, our Russian compatriots accomplished heroic deeds in the exploration of Sakhalin, for the sake of which you can idolize a man, and we do not need this? We do not know what kind of people they were and are, we just sit in our home and complain that God created man imperfect? Sakhalin, that is a place of unbearable suffering, which free man and serf alike are hardly able to bear at all. The ones who had to deal with Sakhalin and who worked there have accomplished terribly challenging tasks and accomplish them even now. I am sorry that I am not sentimental; otherwise I would say that we should make pilgrimages to places like Sakhalin, as the Turks make them to Mecca, and that particularly sailors and prison guards should look on Sakhalin as the military look on Sevastopol. From the books I have read and which I read, it emerges that we have let millions of people rot in the prisons, aimlessly and barbarically. And we have driven tens of thousands of people in chains across the cold, they became infected with syphilis, demoralized, we have increased the numbers of criminals and put all the blame on those red-nosed prison wardens. Today the whole of educated Europe knows that it is not the overseers who

are to be blamed but each and every one of us, but this should be nothing, should really be of no interest to us? The hailed Sixties have not done anything for the sick and the prisoners and therefore violated the most important commandment of Christian civilization. In our times, something is done for the sick – nothing, however, for the prisoners. Our lawyers are absolutely not interested in the penal system. No, I assure you, Sakhalin is interesting, we need it, and it only is regrettable that it is just me. That I am the one who goes out there and not someone else who understands the cause better and is better able to arouse the interest of society. I am travelling only for personal trifles. ([13]; March 9, 1890, to A.S. Suvorin, Letters II, pp. 108f.)

The bitter tone of the reply demonstrates the strength and conviction of his motivation behind the undertaking. This is aptly formulated on provocation, while Čechov remains only vague as he thinks it is necessary to indicate voluntarily reasons for his trip.

A last reason leading him to this enterprise becomes clear from a response to a provocation and criticism. He writes again to Leontjev-Ščeglov:

If the criticism on whose authority you rely knows what we both do not know, why then has it remained silent until today and has not disclosed the truth and immutable laws? If they knew, believe me, they would have long ago shown us the right way, then we would know what we had to do, [...] and we would not get bored so stupidly as we do now, and you would not be pulled to the theater, nor I to Sakhalin. ([13]; March 20, 1890, Letters II, p. 120)

So it was also the desire to learn more about people by studying them in extreme situations by living together with them. 'Our whole attention on the criminal is focused on him only until he is convicted. But from the moment he is deported to exile, he is forgotten by the whole world. But what the exile does to him, I can only imagine [...]. The exile one needs to see, at all costs, to study it personally. In it lie, without doubt, the worst of absurdities, where man can get to with his conventional ideas about life and truth' [14].

Certainly, he wanted to help these outcasts, but by no means with the ambition to be better off in any moral sense: '[...] no right to think of excelling, in terms of morality, neither positively nor negatively, beyond the ordinary. No heroics, no meanness – I am just like most other people'.

His journey was more adventurous than most trips are today for Red Cross delegates travelling to their locations, but adventurousness cannot be held against him as the only motive. Rather, when reading his letters ([13]; Letters II, p. 120) to family and friends from the trip, one feels that he is not just an adventurer looking for challenges and danger, but that he instead avoids them and should

ders the strains and hardships. Such an undertaking would hardly be made based on his spirit of adventure when, despite oft-repeated euphemisms, he was very well informed about the critical state of his body, as it probably was already severely affected by tuberculosis – although, as a tall, sturdy and athletic man at the time he was in denial about his illness.

Preparation

Čechov planned his trip for the spring of 1890, hoping that the ice in the Siberian rivers on his route of travel had already melted. He hoped to get to Sakhalin by this way in 2 months, work there for 2–3 months, and then leave again before winter ([13]; January 20, 1890, to M.N. Galkin-Vraskij, and February 10, 1890, to A.N. Pleščeyev, Letters II, pp. 97, 100). As a route, he described the following to his sister in late January: '[...] along the Kama, Perm, Tyumen, Tomsk, Irkutsk, down the Amur, Sakhalin, Japan, Colombo, Port Said, Constantinople and Odessa, I will get also to Manila. Departure from Moscow in early April'. For preparation of the journey, 3 months remained from January 20 until his departure on April 21, 1890, the first being the date on which his plans were fixed for the first time in a petition to the chief administrator of all prisons in the Ministry of Interior, M.N. Galkin-Vraskij:

Your Excellency, gracious Sir Mikhail Nikolayevič!

Since in the spring of this year I intend to travel to Eastern Siberia for scientific and literary purposes and have the wish, among others, to visit the island of Sakhalin, both its central and southern parts, I have the audacity to respectfully ask Your Excellency to lend me support, if possible, for achieving the above objectives. With sincere respect and devotion I have the honor to be Your Excellency's obedient servant. Anton Čechov.

Although the letter was personally delivered to the office of the Central Prison Department in St. Petersburg, it remained unanswered. So as, years later, the archives of the prison administration were opened by the Soviet authorities, there was even a secret memorandum by Galkin-Vraskij instructing the head of prisons in Sakhalin to prevent Čechov from meeting with certain categories of prisoners. It left it up to the description of the Governor-General of the Amur Region to grant Čechov free access to all prisoners except political prisoners.

While he was at Suvorin's in St. Petersburg, enjoying his hospitality, he read books and journals on Sakhalin, asked friends to provide him with books and articles, and asked his sister and her friends to make excerpts from rel-

evant writings in Moscow's libraries. 'I am sitting all day long, reading and excerpting. In my head and on paper, nothing else than Sakhalin. Madness. *Mania sachalinosa*' ([11], p. 212; to A.N. Pleščeyev, Letters II, p. 103). 'All day long I am writing and reading and reading and writing [...]. The more I read, the more firmly I am convinced that in these two months I shall not even be able to complete a quarter of what I have planned, and I cannot sit for longer than two months in Sakhalin: for the damn boats will not be waiting! Work is varied, but dull [...]. You have to be a geologist, meteorologist, anthropologist, and I am not used to it, it bores me' ([13]; to A.S. Suvorin, Letters II, p. 105).

'In my work on Sakhalin I will be acting like such an erudite son of a bitch that you can only throw your hands up. I've stolen so many ideas and so much knowledge from other people's books which I pretend to be my own. In our practical age, it cannot be otherwise' ([13]; to A.S. Suvorin, Letters II, p. 106).

'I am sitting at home and I am reading incessantly, about how much, in 1863, a ton of coal from Sakhalin cost, and how much one from Shanghai; I am reading about wind directions and NE, NW and SE and other winds that will blow on me when I observe my own seasickness on the coasts of Sakhalin. I read about soil, subsoil, sandy loam and loamy sand, by the way: I am not mad as yet' ([13]; to M.J. Čaikovsky, Letters II, p. 112).

Such intensive preparations – Čechov's preliminary bibliography on the subject includes at least 65 titles – are not possible for today's Red Cross delegates, since they are often ordered to a new location at very short notice. How to make the necessary preparations has to be learned in briefings at the Genevan headquarters, where experienced delegates who have just returned from their missions focus on political, economic, historical and geographical circumstances. Additional information must be acquired on site, which today is usually much easier because there is almost always some literature to be found in one of the world languages and other delegates can help with orientation. In this respect, Čechov was working all on his own.

For the time period of his trip it also proved difficult for him to obtain funding, because not only would the trip come to be very expensive, but he still felt obligated to support his family as he had always done it since his early student days.

'From the Society of Dramatic Writers, I got more than 600 rubles' – the fee for the final performances of *Ivanov* in St. Petersburg; then he received 782 rubles for the story of *The Devil* (later title: *Thieves*), which he had sent to

Suvorin on March 15 and which was published on April 1, he obtained royalties for his earlier story collection *Colorful Stories*, and by the end of March 1890, *Grumpy People* appeared – dedicated to Pjotr Ilič Čaikovsky. ‘From Sev. Vestn I will get 200–300 rubles, and probably the girls have amassed the same amount in your bookstores for the books again, if not even more’ (Letters II, p. 118). In addition he got 1,500 rubles from Suvorin in advance for the reports on the trip that he would write for the newspaper *Novoe Vremya* and also a correspondent’s document from this newspaper, dated April 15th, which would have to replace a letter of recommendation and the passport, which was his only travel document.

Today, a Red Cross delegate has to neither manage the organization nor secure the financing of his trip, nor does he need to make financial sacrifices. All these points are handled by the headquarters in Geneva, promptly and reliably. Čechov humorously appeased his relatives and friends regarding the dangers awaiting him: ‘I feel as if I were going to war, although I do not see any danger in front of me, except the toothache I am going to get inevitably’ ([13]; Letters II, p. 133).

Even in the letters from the trip itself, he is always careful to play down the sometimes very real dangers after having survived them. There is again an echo of concern in them that people back home would dramatize situations that he had experienced standing alone. He knew well that what he described soberly on the basis of his observations might give rise to melodramatic exaggeration at home: ‘I greet all of you. Papa and Mama, I urge you, do not have worries about me and do not see any dangers where none exist’ ([13]; Letters II, p. 139).

Yet he was realistic enough to make some practical arrangements for the event that he would not return. In a long letter to the editor of *Russkaya Mysl*, V.M. Lavrov, he dismissed the critique that he was a ‘priest of unprincipled writing’ as a slander to which he ‘would have failed to respond, but I leave Russia these days for a long time, maybe I will never return, and I do not have the strength to abstain from an answer’ ([13]; Letters II, pp. 131f.). The letter closes very personally: ‘It goes without saying that after your accusation, not only business relationships between us but also the usual bowing acquaintance have become impossible’. Nevertheless, this letter is more than a personal polemic which he had to address before he left. It provides him with the opportunity for a justification of his own life and writing style, to which he feels rightfully obliged because he does not know whether he will later have further opportunities or even be able to work at all.

In the abovementioned letter to I.L. Leontjev-Ščeglov of March 22 about ‘morals’, he provides a kind of ‘testamentary’ assessment which only a person who is not sure whether he ever would be able to come back to these themes once again can write. In the penultimate letter to A.S. Suvorin of April 1, 1890, before his departure, Čechov must also make clear something to his addressee: ‘You insult me because of my objectivity, which you call indifference towards good and evil, lack of ideals and ideas, etc. You want me to say when I present horse thieves that horse theft is an evil, but this has basically already been known for a long time, even without me. Others should sit in judgment over them – my job is to show what kind of people they are. I write [...]: You’re dealing with horse thieves, and yet you need to know that these are not beggars but people who want to have enough to eat, that these people make a cult out of it, and that horse theft is not simple theft but a passion. Of course, it would be nice to combine art and sermon, but for me personally it is almost impossible for technical reasons as well. That is, in order to present horse thieves on 700 lines, I have to talk all the time the way they are talking and thinking and feeling; would I add something subjective, it would blur the images and my narrative would not get as compact as it has to be for a short story. When I write, I firmly count on the reader, believing that he will add subjective elements which, in the story itself, are lacking. Stay in good spirits!’ ([13]; April 10, 1890, Letters II, p. 129).

The multitude of tasks and obligations before leaving, and probably also his modesty and personal matters, prevented him from drafting a will, but in the last letter to Suvorin before departure we find the sentence which, in his view, is sufficient for practical purposes: ‘In the case of shipwreck or the like please remember that everything I possess now or could possess in the future belongs to my sister, she will pay my debts’ ([13]; April 15, 1890, to A.S. Suvorin, Letters II, p. 133).

On the whole, his mood at the time of preparation is rather cheerful: ‘If I will not be eaten by bears and convicts on Sakhalin, if I will not perish due to typhoons in Japan, or due to the heat in Aden, I will return in December and then rest on my laurels in anticipation of old age, without doing anything anymore’ ([13]; March 16, 1890, to I.L. Leontjev-Ščeglov, Letters II, p. 114).

Before his departure, we find Čechov busy with yet another topic, Tolstoy’s *The Kreutzer Sonata*, which was passed as a manuscript from hand to hand in those days, offering him the opportunity to briefly reflect upon his relationship with Tolstoy:

Fig. 1. Čechov (wearing a gray coat) with family and friends at the time of his departure.

I will not say that it is a brilliant thing lasting forever – I am not a judge, but in my opinion, in the mass of what can be seen here and abroad today there is hardly anything that would be of equal importance and power with regard to the basic ideas and its beauty of execution. Not to mention the artistic qualities, which are at times startling, one is grateful for this novel simply because it is extremely thought-provoking – if you read it, you can hardly refrain from saying: “It is so true!” or “This is nonsense!” It is true, there are some very annoying shortcomings [...] Still, these defects vanish like chaff in the wind, and are not easily noticed given the qualities of the novel; and if you noticed them, the fact would only annoy you that the novel has not completely escaped the fate of all human works, all of which are imperfect and not free from stains. ([13]; February 15, 1890, Letters II, p. 101)

This assessment is interesting in that it clearly presents his mood (‘this is just in case I cannot come back to it’) in connection with recourse to them the first week after his return (letter to A.S. Suvorin): ‘Before my trip,

The Kreutzer Sonata was a sensation for me, now I find it funny and pointless. Whether I am more mature because of my trip, whether I had lost my mind – the devil knows’ ([13]; December 17, 1890, to A.S. Suvorin, Letters II, p. 205).

We will come to a better understanding of how he arrived at this change of mind as we learn more about the journey and its goals.

The Journey

On the evening of April 21, 1890, Čechov was accompanied by his family and friends to the Yaroslavl railway station for an 8 o’clock departure (fig. 1). For a small part of the first leg he was accompanied, but then he continued his journey alone. From there he travelled down the Volga, at first on a steamer, then to Perm on the Kama. He then proceeded by train to Yekaterinburg, where he was to visit some relatives of his mother. After a brief stay, during which he had to treat his cough and hemorrhoids, he took the train to Tyumen at the foot of the Urals, where he arrived on May 3.

Here the arduous part of the trip began: nearly 2,000 miles in a rented, two-horse basket wagon to Tomsk. During this part of his journey, he suffered through 12 days of harsh wind and weather with rain and occasional snow flurries. Although it was already mid-May, there was still no sign of summer coming to this part of Siberia.

In his letters to the people back home, he irritates them again and again to trigger panicked reactions, only to calm them down again:

The people here inspire the newcomer with a feeling like horror: their protruding cheek bones, broad foreheads, broad shoulders, tiny eyes, giant fists. They are born in the local iron foundries, and at their birth a mechanic assists and no accoucheur. One of them comes into your room with a samovar or a carafe, and before you see him he has killed you. I stand aside. ([13]; April 29, 1890, to Čechov’s family from Yekaterinburg, Letters II, p. 142)

We met vagrants with pots on their back: these gentlemen are walking freely on any road of Siberia, and from time to time they stab an elderly woman in order to make rags for their feet from her clothes, sometimes they tear the metal plate with the number on it down from a verst pole – it might be useful; at another time, they will smash an oncoming beggar’s skull or knock out the eyes of some fellow, but they do not touch travelers all that much. Travelling here is completely safe as far as robberies are concerned. [...] In general the people are good-natured, with excellent traditions. [...] The trip is completely safe. [...] Robbery, assault, criminals – they are all nonsense and fairy tales. ([13]; Letters II, p. 145)

Čechov reported from this leg of the journey: '[...] terrible cold, day and night, sheepskin, felt boots, cold rains, winds and a desperate struggle (life-and-death) with the flooded rivers. The rivers had flooded fields and roads, and I was constantly exchanging my coach for a boat and travelling like Venetians in their gondola; the barges, the waiting on the shore, the rowing across, etc., all that took so much time [...]' ([13]; June 5, 1890, to A.N. Pleščeyev from Irkutsk, Letters II, p. 170). In Tomsk, this boring town with lots of drunken people and Asian lawlessness and without beautiful women ([13]; Letters II, p. 169), Čechov was busy writing letters and articles for Suvorin's *Novoe Vremya* (*The New Times*). There are 9 garrulous, small but informative sketches of situations and vivid portraits of fellow travelers.

On May 21 he went on to Irkutsk, again almost 2,000 kilometers away. Had the roads and paths been bad until now, the path that lay before him turned out to be even worse: 'What a murderous road! With great difficulty we have arrived in Krasnoyarsk [...] such impassable mud and such an utterly neglected road' ([13]; May 28, 1890, to Čechov's family from Krasnoyarsk, Letters II, p. 166; fig. 2).

Summarizing this section of the trip, Čechov wrote:

[...] impassable mud, my chaise and I stuck in the mire like flies in thick jam. How often I broke my chaise (it is my own), how many versts I marched, how bespattered my face and my clothes were! I was not walking but wading through mud. How much I swore at it all! My brain would not think anymore, could do nothing but swear. I was half dead from exhaustion and very glad when I had reached [Krasnoyarsk]. ([13]; Letters II, p. 169)

Quite different, then, the onward journey to Irkutsk:

1,566 versts again, heat, smoke from forest fires, and dust – dust in one's mouth, nose, pockets; looking in the mirror, one feels like one's face has been painted. When, after my arrival in Irkutsk, I washed in the baths, the soapsuds from my head were not white but rather ashen brown, as if I were washing a horse. ([13]; June 5, 1890, to A.N. Pleščeyev, Letters II, p. 170)

The beauty of the scenery comforted Čechov even with the crazy chatting of his travelling companions. The sight of Lake Baikal – spreading over 86 versts – left him dumbfounded with admiration: 'It is like a mirror. [...] The banks are high, precipitous, stony and wooded; on the right and left one sees small capes [...] It is like the Crimea' ([13]; June 13, 1890, Station Listvenitchnaya, Letters II, p. 176). On deck of a small paddle steamer on which horses were transported he crossed the lake. Stooped over the railing, he was completely fascinated by the turquoise-colored water, the clarity of which allowed him to look

Fig. 2. Nikolay Vasilevič Pirogov (1872–1913). 'Two Carriages on a Road in Spring' (1896).

deep into unfathomable depths with underwater rocks and a mysterious flora. After this short crossing of Lake Baikal, the road started again and went on once more over wooden hills and plains. This time the carriage drove fast and without incident. On June 20, they arrived in Sretensk, just one hour before the departure of the steamboat *Jermak*. The worst part of the trip, the journey by carriage, was over. 'Overall, my journey was successful, may God give everybody such a one. I have not been ill a single time, and of the many things which I carried with me I have lost only a penknife, a strap of my trunk and a little jar of carbolic ointment [...] I have grown so used to driving over the country roads that I do not feel like myself at all and simply cannot believe that I do not sit in a chaise and that I do not hear the rattling of the wheels anymore' ([13]; June 20, 1890, to his mother, Letters II, p. 181). 'It is a wonderful country', he wrote to Pleščeyev, 'one can say that the poetry of Siberia starts only at the Baikal. Till then it is only prose' (June 5, 1890, Letters II, p. 169).

When, after the *Šilka*, his ship reached the Amur, Čechov's enthusiasm was still rising. The field glasses constantly in front of his eyes, he searched the deserted shores of the stream, inhabited only by great crested grebes and herons. When the steamboat stopped on the way, he went ashore and visited the villages by the river-side on both the Russian and Chinese sides. Here, complete freedom reigned. 'I love the Amur', Čechov confessed to Suvorin, 'I should be glad to spend a couple of years on these shores. Here it is nice, there is freedom and warmth. Switzerland and France together have never

Fig. 3. Convicts on a boat to Sakhalin [3].

known such a feeling of freedom. The lowest convict breathes more freely on the Amur than a general in Russia' ([13]; June 27, 1890, to A.S. Suvorin, Letters II, p. 189).

After changing ships twice, he was in the Strait of Tary on July 9 and, 'with pride and delight', saw the coast of Sakhalin appearing at a distance (fig. 3).

Two days later, the steamboat dropped anchor in Alexandrovsk, the capital and penal execution center of the island. In this harbor, Čechov went ashore together with a contingent of prisoners and found lodging with a colleague, a doctor. The town, with approximately 3,000 inhabitants, was dreary and quiet. However, it looked clean. On the streets, the rattling of prisoners' chains was to be heard when the prisoners went to work or came back. In Sakhalin there were five penal colonies. When a prisoner had served his sentence, he still had to remain on the island as a colonist. Some women also lived there who had followed their husbands to exile. The military governor of Sakhalin, General Kononovič, explained everything to Čechov and received him with extreme kindness. He promised to help him in his investigations and to even give him access to the central archive of the prison administration. This cooperativeness was confirmed some days later by the Governor-General of the Amur region, Baron Korff. He gave Čechov the permission to move freely on the whole territory of the island, to consult official documents and to question prisoners (with the exception of the political ones). He demonstrated with pleasure his humanitarian attitude towards those whom he called 'the unhappy'. He stated that their life

would be lighter here 'than anywhere in Russia, or even in Europe [...] Hope was taken from nobody to gain their full rights again; there is no life sentence. The unlimited *katorga* is limited to twenty years. The hard labor is not the worst thing. Their involuntary work is of no personal use to the workers – in this lies the hardship, not in the physical strain. There are no chains, no markings, no shaven heads' ([9]; p. 12). Čechov, however, noted that the life of the 'unhappy' was not as familiar to Baron Korff as he thought.

History of the Russian Red Cross as Part of the History of the Movement [15]

The Red Cross Movement 'originated on the field of battle as an expression of mercy for the wounded, the sick, and prisoners of war, irrespective of their nationality. Dr. Nikolay Ivanovič Pirogov (1810–1881), an outstanding Russian scientist, surgeon and public figure, was one of its initiators (fig. 4).

During the Crimean War (1853–1856) he advocated an international treaty to relieve the victims of war and the establishment of officially recognized societies to provide relief to the wounded and the sick. He also wanted international law to include a codified minimum of rules to assure war victims of care and medical personnel of immunity. In his *Course of Military Surgery*, Dr. Pirogov said that war was a 'traumatic epidemic', and called for an international organization to provide relief to the wounded. The public help to the wounded and sick defendants of Sevastopol, which he organized, served as a prototype for the Red Cross.

As early as 1854, the first social organization with activity similar to the Red Cross was organized in Russia (St. Petersburg) on Dr. Pirogov's initiative, with the aim of attending to the wounded during the Crimean War, under the name *Krestovozdvizhenskaia obshina sestry miloserdija* (Holy Cross Society of Sisters of Mercy). Interestingly, the Russian version of the Sisters bore the stamp of its imperial patroness, the Grand Duchess Elena Pavlovna. At the same time, these more innovative initiatives coexisted with many of the more traditional forms of wartime humanitarian assistance, such as the Russian Empire's requisition of the services of Mennonite pioneers in Southern Ukraine, which was also accompanied by much voluntary contribution from those communities to the cause of relieving the sufferings of sick and wounded soldiers.

When Dr. Pirogov returned from the Crimean War, where he supervised some 160 women who had volunteered as nurses, he wrote about how deeply he was moved by their patriotism and desire to sacrifice themselves for the noble cause. These women had served without pay and worked right at the front, faced many of the same dangers and hardships as the soldiers. For example, while deployed across the Black Sea, Florence Nightingale and her English sisters remained at the base hospital in Scutari, and Dr. Pirogov sent the Russian nurses to bandaging points and field hospitals near the fighting. To Dr. Pirogov, the women's exemplary work demonstrated that 'up to now, we have completely ignored the marvelous gifts of our women'.

These humanitarian ideas were realized in Western Europe by Henry Dunant. On his initiative, supported by Swiss public organizations and the French government, an international conference to negotiate provisions of peacetime assistance to war victims was convened in Geneva on October 26, 1863. The main Red Cross principles were formulated at this and the 1864 conference, likewise held in Geneva. On August 22, 1864, delegates from 12 states signed the Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armed Forces in the Field. Under this landmark convention, military medical establishments and their personnel are recognized as neutral and enjoy immunity and protection from belligerent countries in wartime. Russia acceded to the Geneva Convention on May 22, 1867.

The Russian Red Cross Society was established on May 3, 1867. This was a benevolent public organization. Owing to the humanitarian ideas accepted as the principles of this society, it attracted outstanding Russian personalities who shaped it into an organization for the social masses. The Russian Red Cross Society sent medical detachments to France and Germany during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871, to Ethiopia during the Italo-Ethiopian War of 1895–1896, and to South Africa during the Anglo-Transvaal (Boer) War of 1899–1902.

After the October Revolution of 1917, the Soviet government's decrees, signed by Lenin (1918), pledged continuation of the activity of the Russian Red Cross Society. But it was only in October 1921 that the ICRC decided to extend recognition of the Russian Red Cross Society to the Soviet Red Cross. In the meantime, on the initiative of national societies of the Entente countries, a new international organization, the League of Red Cross Societies, was set up in 1919 for the purpose of perpetuating in peacetime the driving force of the Red Cross, ensuring the

Fig. 4. Ilya Yefimovič Repin (1844–1930). Portrait of the Surgeon Nikolay Ivanovič Pirogov. Oil on canvas. 64.5 × 53.4 cm. The State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.

cooperation of national societies in their struggle for the health of human beings, alleviation of their suffering and relief in case of natural calamities. Today this is the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

Sakhalin [9, 10]

'On the July 5, 1890, I arrived by steamboat at the city of Nikolayevsk [...] Voluntarily one does not come here!' ([9]; p. 18; all citations in the following stem from this publication unless noted otherwise). The convicts and penal colonists, with few exceptions, move around freely on the streets. They move about without chains and escort, and one meets them wherever one goes individually and in groups. 'The *katorga* is generally a herd of cowardly, degenerated, half-starved and bootlicking idiots' (p. 32).

I saw the inhabitants of Sakhalin [...] around for the first time: They consist of men and women at working age, there were old people and small children, but there was no one of a young age. There were no songs, no concertina, no drunken ones in the streets; the people crept around like shadows and were quiet as a shadow. The *katorga* remains a *katorga* even with Bengal lights, and music only evokes fear of death when heard from far away by a person who will never return to his native country again. (p. 35)

Čechov writes critically about the *katorga*, about the prisoners being in Siberia and on Sakhalin. Compared with Dostoyevsky, who argued about the *katorga* in his book *Notes from a Death's House*, Čechov is a writer and thinker with a sharper look. He is also a sociologist, while Dostoyevsky approached the subject more from a psychological perspective. Of course some difference lies already in their biographies: Dostoyevsky was directly affected, having been exiled to the *katorga*, Čechov was the self-suffering observer. But, alarmingly, not much had essentially changed over the course of 40 years, and Čechov condemns circumstances which are only slightly better in his days than previously.

In chapter VIII, Čechov describes unemotionally how frightfully packed together prisoners and their families live in mass lodgings. It is the mud, the stench, the confinement, the cold and the unsanitary conditions that form the picture. He condemns communal lodgings and criticizes the multiple allocations. Concerning the topics of human dignity and criminal law, he particularly treats the arrangements and lashings: toilets which are only separated by plastic curtains, beds on the floor, and often only one table without a sufficient number of chairs.

The damage to human dignity consists, according to Čechov's thoughts, also in the pointless cruelty of keeping persons off sensible employment. The supervisory staff judges everything under security aspects; regimentation becomes an end in itself, constitutional missions are spurned. 'The extraordinary grimness lies not in the work, but in the circumstances, the dullness and unreliability of various small officials as well as in the fact that one must endure impertinence, injustice and arbitrariness wherever one goes' [9]. The system of imprisonment carries this inadequacy in itself, strengthens and enhances it, always demanding retaliation.

Assistance

In order to get access to the inhabitants of the island, Čechov conducted an investigation of the population, a census, noting carefully on cards: (1) the names of the settlement; (2) the house number according to the list

provided by the state authorities; (3) the state of the registered person, i.e. convict, penal colonist, deported farmer, free farmer; (4) given name, father's name and surname; (5) age; (6) religion; (7) place of birth; (8) date of arrival in Sakhalin; (9) principal employment and craft; (10) level of literacy; (11) marital status; and (12) whether there was any support from the state.

[...] one feels the lack of something important: there is neither a grandfather nor a grandmother, no pictures of an old saint and no grandfatherly pieces of furniture, there is no past, no tradition. There are no customs and traditions. The equipment is of a casual character and it appears in such a way as if the family did not live in its home but in a foreign flat, or had only just arrived and the flat was not warm yet. There are no cats. On winter evenings one does not hear a single house cricket chirping – and what is the central issue: there is no feeling of a native country [in Russian: *chabitat*]. (p. 45)

I was asked: 'Why do you write down everything about us? You cannot expect anything good anymore, because even God has turned away and renounced us' [...]. (p. 47)

At times it happens that people live on rotten wood with salt and even eat each other, but this does not refer to tourists and not to officials (p. 48).

Chapter XVI deals with the composition of the exiles according to gender, questions regarding women, female prisoners, etc.:

[...] tragic figures, who came here in order to help organize the life of their husbands and have lost their own. The element of love plays a fateful role in their sad existence. (p. 251)

Human dignity, even femininity and the female convicts' sense of shame are not considered at all, as if it were evident that all this was extinguished by their disgrace or vanished on the way to the prisons or on their journey. At any rate, punishers do not seem to be led by any consideration that it could be embarrassing and humiliating for them. (p. 257)

Beside need and idleness there is still a third source of all possible evil for the free woman: her husband. (p. 259)

After his return, Čechov prepared a collection of books which he sent to Sakhalin. On March 8, 1891, he notes: '7 boxes with 2,200 volumes sent to Sakhalin'. 'Private initiatives for collecting donations are forbidden. The minister has categorically excluded them and declared that to collect and distribute donations would exclusively be allowed to the parochial administration and to the Red Cross' ([13]; October 13, 1891, to A.S. Suvorin, Letters II, p. 263).

At the end of December 1892, the almanac *Help to the Starving* appeared, published by the company Russkii Vedomosti, in Moscow; it contains chapter XXII from *The Island of Sakhalin* about refugees and hoboes.

Fig. 5. Enchainment [3].

Protection and Detention

In several chapters of his book [9], Čechov describes the *katorga* prisons in detail: the collective cells, the prisoners in chains, the latrines, the hard labor and the workshops:

[...] here, the same dreadful poverty rules, which can be hidden under rags no more than a fly can hide under the magnifying glass; the same miserable life, which one can call in the truest sense of the word 'nihilistic', because it negates private property, privacy, comfort and quiet sleep. (p. 64)

Punishment – revenge, intimidation or improvement [...] the life in the collective cells enslaves the prisoner and changes him completely in the course of time [...] suffocated by the habit of living in a herd [...] [he] loses his health and old age, becomes morally susceptible. (p. 229)

5,905 prisoners of both genders (36% with up to 8 years conviction time, 26.5% from 8 to 12 years, 12.7% from 12 to 15 years, 12.3% from 15 to 20 years, 6.5% for life). (p. 230)

[...] also good half short-term by entry into the colony, the abilities of colonization would have already been lost. (p. 231)

The chain house – the most common threat on Sakhalin is: "I will put you in the chain house". There the padlock jangles [...] and we step into a small cell where about 20 men are accommodated at this time [...] ragged, unwashed, disheveled, in chains and in execrable footwear which is wrapped in cloth and cords; one half of the head is ruffled, the other shaven where hair already starts growing again. They all have lost weight and look worn. There are no beds, they sleep on bare plank beds. In the corner stands a bucket for excrements; everybody has to do one's business in the presence of 20 witnesses [...] no possibility of being alone – what one at least would need for praying, thinking and gaining self-confidence, which all followers of the improvement theory consider to

be essential. Excessive card gaming, shouting, laughter, gossiping, door banging and, in the chain house, clinking of chains which goes on the whole night [...]. (p. 69; fig. 5)

The crimes are extremely dull, uninteresting and primitive [...] the colorlessness and meagerness of the contents of hundreds of stories, autobiographies and anecdotes [...] it is always quiet. The ear soon becomes acquainted with the steady clink of the chains, the rushing of the sea and the buzzing of the telegraph lines; the impression of a deadly silence is still enhanced by these sounds. (p. 118)

The prison of Voevodzk [...] of all prisons on Sakhalin the most hideous one [...] complaints about bugs [...] strong smells of urine and acid [...] people tied up to carts [...] in complete idleness. (p. 126)

[...] They were ragged, soaked with rain, bespattered with dirt, and they shivered. Here the word "pariah" comes to one's mind, which is used for the state of a person who cannot fall even deeper [...] moments in which it seemed to me that I experienced the most extreme degree of degradation with a person and that one cannot go any further. (p. 140; fig. 6)

The *katorga* does not begin in the *katorga*, but in the colony [...] a real *febris Sachalinensis*. (p. 235)

Almost half of the (3,552) farmers on Sakhalin do not own houses. (p. 263)

The main element of the exile: she or he does not have the right to return to the native country. (p. 240)

[...] passionate wish to breathe at least once more the air of freedom before death and to lead a real life for a while, not only a prisoner's existence. (p. 243)

Summarizing the experiences he had made during the two months he had spent on the northern island, Čechov wrote:

Fig. 6. The severest punishment on Sakhalin: being chained to a carriage [3].

I have lived in the north of Sakhalin for two months. I have seen everything. I do not know yet what I will manage to extract from it, but I have done a lot. I was rising every day at five o'clock, I was going to bed late, and this was not preventing me from being irritated the whole day, thinking of things that I could not have realized. Now that I have finished, I have the feeling of having seen everything, but nevertheless of not having been able to notice the essential. In parentheses I must say that I had the patience to complete a census of the population of Sakhalin. I completed the circle around all the deportation places, I entered every hut, I spoke to everybody. I used a card system and made notes on about 10,000 forced and deported people. In other words, in Sakhalin there is no captive, prisoner or convict to whom I have not spoken. Particularly well I conducted the census of children, on which I have found many hopes. I attended a flogging with rods, after which, for three or four nights, I had dreamt of the executioner and the horrible whip. I spoke with men chained to barrows [...]. (to A.S. Suvorin, Letters II, p. 193; fig. 6, 7)

Cooperation

As for cooperation with other societies, since this is particularly useful and important in work for the Red Cross nowadays, Čechov experienced none – he was working all on his own, though enjoying good company on several occasions (fig. 8).

As long as I was living on Sakhalin, I felt only a certain bitterness inside, as though from rancid butter, and now, in the memory of it, Sakhalin appears to me a perfect hell. For two months I had worked hard, in the third month I began to feel ill from the bitterness I mentioned, from boredom [...]. ([13]; December 9, 1890, to A.S. Suvorin, Letters II, p. 200)

Čechov returned home to Moscow on December 7, 1890:

A strange story – as long as I was on the move to Sakhalin and back, I felt absolutely healthy, but now, at home, the devil knows what is going on with me: I have constant headaches, all my limbs feel floppy, I get tired fast, I am apathetic, and worst of all, my heart is aching. ([13]; December 24, 1890, to A.S. Suvorin, Letters II, p. 207)

Over the following years, he is occupied with writing up his notes and his concerns about publishing his book *The Island of Sakhalin* [9].

Sakhalin moves ahead. Sometimes I would like to sit here for three to five years and work hard on it; sometimes, on the other hand, in moments of mistrust, I would simply like to flout it. By God, it would be nice to dedicate two to three years to it! I write a lot of silly stuff because I am no specialist; however, I also describe some really reasonable things. And Sakhalin is nice, because it will live even a hundred years after us, because it could be a source and aid to everyone who deals with penal execution and to those who are interested in it. ([13]; August 30, 1891, to A.S. Suvorin, Letters II, p. 255)

The book [9] appeared at the end of May, beginning of June, 1895 in an edition of the journal *Russian Thought* (*Russkaya Mysl*), after single chapters had appeared in that journal since October 1894.

You scoff at my thoroughness, dryness, academic nature, and at the grandchildren who will appreciate my work [...] My *Sakhalin* is an academic work. Now, medicine cannot accuse me anymore of betrayal: I paid the necessary tribute to science and to what the old authors called pedantry. And I am glad that, in my cloakroom of fiction, this coarse prisoner's smock is also hanging. ([13]; January 2, 1894, to A.S. Suvorin, Letters II, p. 121)

Čechov reads L.N. Tolstoy's epilogue to *The Kreutzer Sonata*:

Even if they beat me to death: but this is silly and more vague than the *Letters of a Governor's Wife* (by N. Gogol), which I despise. The devil should get them, all the philosophy of the great men of this world! Everywhere great, wise men behave like generals, despotic and impolite and thick-skinned, because they are persuaded to go out exempt from punishment. Diogenes spit into other people's beards because he thought that no one would do him any harm; Tolstoy insults the doctors as villains and louts all around, but he is just as much of a crook whom one cannot drag to court and cannot insult in the newspapers. So to the devil with the philosophy of the great ones of this world. ([13]; September 8, 1891, to A.S. Suvorin, Letters II, p. 257)

Fig. 7. Photograph from: *Russia's Penal Colony in the Far East* [16].

Fig. 8. Outdoor lunch party [3].

Prevention

Anton Pavlovič Čechov, with his personal commitment on the island of Sakhalin, incorporated the fundamental principles of the Red Cross and the Red Crescent: humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, volun-

tary service, unity and universality – which reflect a certain discipline within the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, but also and above all convey an overriding concern for human welfare.

References

- 1 Friedell E: Kulturgeschichte der Neuzeit. München, Beck, 1979.
- 2 Urban P: Čechov-Chronik: Daten zu Leben und Werk. Zürich, Diogenes, 1981.
- 3 Urban P (ed): Anton Čechov: Sein Leben in Bildern. Zürich, Diogenes, 2004.
- 4 Hingley R: A New Life of Chekhov. London, Oxford UP, 1976.
- 5 Ladyjenski V: Souvenirs sur Tchekhov; cited in: Laffite S: Tchekhov. Écrivains de toujours, vol 30. Paris, Seuil, 1955.
- 6 Troyat H: Tschechow: Leben und Werk. Stuttgart, Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1987.
- 7 Tulloch JC: Chekhov: A Structuralist Study. London, Macmillan, 1980.
- 8 von Neuhoff von der Ley A: Anton P Tschechow: Mensch und Dichter. München, 1960.
- 9 Čechov AP: Die Insel Sachalin. Aus dem Russischen von Dick G und Plackmeyer W. Hrsg mit Anmerkungen von Urban P. Zürich, Diogenes, 1976.
- 10 Dalos G: Die Reise nach Sachalin: Auf den Spuren von Anton Tschechow. Hamburg, Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 2001.
- 11 Simmons EJ: Chekhov: A Biography. Chicago, Little Brown, 1962.
- 12 Avilova L: Tchekhov dans ma vie; in: Tchekhov, vu par ses contemporains. Paris, Gallimard, 1970, pp 65–122.
- 13 Čechov AP: Briefe [= Letters I–V]. Hrsg und übers von Urban P. 5 vols. Zürich, Diogenes, 1979.
- 14 Čechov MP: Autour de Tchekhov; in: Tchekhov, vu par ses contemporains. Paris, Gallimard, 1970, pp 33–50.
- 15 Gusynina Y, pers commun, 2011; based in part on Geleta B: IFRC and humanitarian diplomacy. 2009. <http://www.ifrc.org/en/news-and-media/opinions-and-positions/speeches/2009/ifrc-and-humanitarian-diplomacy/>.
- 16 Doroshevich V: Russia's Penal Colony in the Far East: A Translation of Vlas Doroshevich's 'Sakhalin'. Tr and annot by Gentes AA. London, Anthem, 2009.

Erratum

In the article by Pearce J.M.S., entitled 'The Neurology of Aretaeus: Radix Pedix Neurologia' [Eur Neurol 2013;70:106–112, DOI: 10.1159/000352031], please amend the following: unfortunately, the captions for the illustrations have been wrongly placed. Referring in sequence to the actual figures published, the captions should read: Fig. 1. The Extant Works of Aretaeus, the Cappadocian [5]; Fig. 2. Corpus Medicorum Graecorum [9]; Fig. 3. De Cephalea. On the Causes and Symptoms of Chronic Diseases, Book 1, Chapter 2; Fig. 4. Aretaeus, The National Library of Medicine[©].