

Condemned to Die. A Story

Translation of “Zum Tode Verurteilt,”
in **Gerhard Lohrenz**’s *Lose Blaetter I*, 1974,
by **Hilda Lohrenz Bergen**

Russia in the 1920s—the setting a bare room in the Bolshevik headquarters of a town. Three men stand before the town’s commissar. Like a knife, his harsh voice cuts through the silent room: “Horbushen, Lopata, Peters—pick up your belongings and come.” No need to ask what these words mean. The hearts of the three men grow cold with fear. Mechanically, they obey.

“Adieu, comrades,” Horbushen and Peters say to those left in the room. Lopata is silent.

In the hall outside they are greeted by the sight of guards with fixed bayonets: “March, you swine. On to the command post.” There they are ushered into a large, dirty room. A machine gun stands in the corner. Three unsavory looking characters are seated behind a long bare table. The man in the middle is leafing through a sheaf of papers. He pays them no attention. “Let them wait,” he muses, “the cursed Burschuje.” [Derogatory name for landowning class]

Finally he looks up. “Horbushen? Lopata? Peters?” A piercing look fixes each one for a brief moment. Then he averts his glance. Slowly, as though savouring each word, he pronounces, “The Revolutionary Tribunal has found you three guilty. You will be executed tonight. Comrade Kusunizov, take the prisoners and carry out the sentence.”

Lopata collapses with a pitiful cry. "Have mercy, comrade. Why? What have I done? I've told you a thousand times, I have no grain left. I've already given it to the State. Have mercy on my starving children." He sobs uncontrollably. But no mercy is granted. Cruel smiles contort the faces of the henchmen. They are more than ready.

Harbushev, a huge brawny farmer, appears unaffected by it all. He understands the mentality of this gang who have usurped authority and control. No mercy can be expected from them. As part of the Russian land-owning class, he has been chosen for annihilation. With resigned fatalism he accepts what life has dealt him.

Peters, the German, is outwardly unmoved, partly out of some sense of relief. The long prison days and hours spent in limbo waiting for something to happen had been hard to endure. The uncertainty is over.

Kusinizov shouts the command: "About turn. March." Outside the guards call a halt. "Drop everything. Strip." Clad only in their underwear, the three condemned men stand with their hands tied behind their backs. Surrounded by guards, they are escorted through the gate.

It is a mild summer night. Periodically the moon appears, bathing everything in its silvery light and then disappearing behind the clouds, as if choosing not to witness the horrifying crimes devised in the heart of man.

The three prisoners are driven on their way by heavy blows interspersed with cruel taunts. Lopat groans loudly.

The last short journey, Peters thinks. In his mind he pictures the village home of his parents. He sees the sun sinking as the workers return from a day in the fields. His father, strong and broad of frame, busies himself in the yard where his younger brothers and sisters are playing. He recalls the familiar appetizing aromas emanating from the kitchen where his mother is preparing the evening meal. He sees her at the kitchen door beckoning lovingly to him, her firstborn. All that is gone forever, he contemplates as he comes back to reality. His last walk—to his death—merely because he tried to trade clothing for flour to keep his family alive. This is now called "speculation" and classed as hostile activity against the State. And, since he is also the son of a German landowner, he is sentenced to die. Any pretence will do to rid the State of those who are not considered worthy of the new Soviet citizenship.

The group arrives at the cemetery lying just outside the town. Peters is familiar with the place. Large and unkempt, it is surrounded by a five-foot high wall. Under the guards' orders, they turn from the road to march along the wall until they reach a freshly dug grave.

The guard's cynical voice breaks into their thoughts. "Here we are. Line up, you filthy rats," he sneers. The condemned know that any protest is in vain. Peters murmurs, "Be merciful to me, a sinner. Accept me in thy mercy, O Lord."

A loud command—"Fire." The guns bark. They have missed Peters! With a mighty tug he frees his hands from the rope and catapults over the wall. Curses

and repeated shots follow him. As though borne by the wind, Peters races on past gravestones and trees. Ahead of him looms the mausoleum of a wealthy family.

Peters remembers this particular burial vault clearly for he had often passed by it before the days of his imprisonment. He recalls the broken window in the vault. He races around the corner. Yes, there it is. He is barely able to crawl through it. With trembling, groping fingers he now searches for the two large rings on the stone door by means of which the coffins were lowered to the floor below. They have to be here somewhere.

He hears shots nearby. The rings—hurry—hurry! “God, help me,” he prays. There—he has found them at last. Rarely has anyone singlehandedly lifted the massive door. The fear of death gives him superhuman strength. One mighty tug and the stone door moves to the side. Just barely able to squeeze through, he drops to the floor below. The heavy door slides back slowly. A mere crack of an opening remains. If only it would close completely!

Where can he hide? He feels his way in the darkness. He touches a large object—a coffin. He lies down behind it. Will his pursuers find him? Had they seen his race to the mausoleum?

Time stands still for Peters. Hours? Minutes? He has lost all sense of time. Gradually, his agitation subsides. He has, it seems, escaped his pursuers. He breathes a prayer of thanks for this renewed gift of life. Peters stretches his cramped muscles—walks a few steps back and forth. Joyful relief floods his entire being. By now his eyes have adjusted to the darkness. He is in a cellar-like room. Six zinc-plated coffins, those of four adults and two children, stand on cement trestles. The room is unpleasantly damp and cool. But, then, he does not plan to stay here long—only till night-time. But then how will he get out?

Peters stretches his hand upwards. With horror he discovers that he cannot possibly reach the ceiling. Will he be buried alive to suffer a slow and painful death? His hair stands on end at the thought. But how to escape this living death? Surely he cannot end this way.

Fortunately, the tiny crack in the covering sheds enough light to show him where the door is to be found. Peters now drags the largest coffin against the wall. Laboriously he drops the second coffin forward, placing it parallel to the first. Two more are dragged forward and placed next to each other and on top of the first one. It occurs to him that all this is done without appropriate reverence for the dead. He has no option. The needs of the living must take precedence.

He then climbs to the top of the coffins. He can reach the door but is still unable to budge it. By adding the two small coffins he is able to push the door open with his back. The door moves slowly to one side. Light enters and a gust of fresh air streams in, exhilarating and sweet.

Peters knows that he must wait. He dare not leave until night has fallen. The day drags on interminably. In the dark cellar, barefoot and clad only in his underwear, he is soon chilled to the bone. Hunger pangs attack him and more immediate danger still—his body demands rest. He does not allow himself to relax in this ice-cold vault. He walks back and forth in order to keep awake.

Occasionally he sits down on the empty coffin trestles only to find himself almost overpowered by sleep. He must walk—he paces back and forth. Many thoughts assail him as the day drags on. How differently Peters views life here than in the flow and throb of a day filled with sunlight.

At last even this seemingly endless day is over. Peters opens the crack wide enough to squeeze through. Still he waits. He dare not make a premature move. Finally, what bliss to hear the church spire clock strike the midnight hour. The time has come!

Naturally, he can never be seen at his own home again. He is forever homeless. In flight and with a death sentence on his head, he goes out into the night. In spite of this, how jubilant his mood.

His heart sings for he knows with certainty that God, who has preserved him from the bullets of his would-be assassins and miraculously provided a hiding place among the dead, will continue to guide and keep him to the end of his days.