Nikolai Grigorevich Smirnov

Jack Vosmerkin

The American

Translated from the Russian

By

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About 'Jack Vosmerkin' and its author

This book was written long ago, in the 1930s, the years of the first five-year-plans, when collective farms were created and when tractors were first used to cultivate the fields. At the time, there was very little machinery and the ways of the old farms were only beginning to change.

This book tells about the socialistic transformation and events of yesterday. It was read as a summary of the emergence of collective farms. Now it has become history: a living story of how and, under which circumstances, the old ways were broken in order to make way for the new and unknown.

This book has also been favored because of the great literary mastery with which it was written.

Its author, Nikolai Grigorevich Smirnov, possessed a perfect artistic form, entering the world of literature as a theatrical playwright.

When N. G. Smirnov began to write novels for youthful readers, he brought to them his mastery of drama, in which the basis of his story was motion, where every word and every remark confirmed the whole with regards to volume, perception and the power of action.

Smirnov's books were greatly enjoyed by all kinds of readers. This was mostly due to his surprising narrations, one of which you are about to read in 'Jack Vosmerkin—The American.' The reader literally becomes a captive of this book because, in this story, one finds everything that is often lacking: an engaging, realistic subject; a rapid turn of events; and, to the romantic, the revolutionary formation of a new life and the cultivation of a new world.

All of the heroes' adventures occur in the countryside. Smirnov was interested in rural places because it was there, in the 30s, that one of the most important questions of life and government were being decided: collectivization—Independent, small villager lots were knitted together to form large, collective fields, where tractors were freely provided and shared.

N. G. Smirnov does not send his Yashka Vosmerkin to America in vain, bringing him back to Russia as Jack, with agricultural knowledge. Jack gets to know plenty about machinery and tractors. Smirnov makes Jack, who now combines both Russian vision and American business sense, transform a Russian village on a new scale.

While Jack makes his way around America as a worker-for-hire, a dream is born and grows in him to have his own farm. This dream cannot become reality in America, where farmhands do not have the possibility of

saving up enough dollars in order to obtain even the smallest plot of land. This dream can only be realized back home in Russia, where all villagers are given land for free.

I will not begin to tell the contents of this novel—it wouldn't be right to deny you the pleasure of becoming acquainted with this book yourself—but notice while reading how naturally the transition from one scene to another occurs. Nikolai Grigorevich had his own theory about this. He told one of his writer-friends that "our currency is the action and dramatization of action," and he advised, "to write with scenes," and further explained that, "a scene is not a sketch, but a transition from one situation to another."

He widely used these techniques himself, but don't think that Smirnov's subjects were built along the straight and narrow. No, his novels were characterized by the complexity of composition, crossing lines like the rails of a large rail junction. The more interesting it is to find one's way through the cunning interlacing, the greater the desire to keep on reading, wanting to know what will happen next. To predict what will happen next in this story with accuracy is never possible. At the last minute, one is shown an unexpected, agile course, and an action quickly passes through it.

N. G. Smirnov died in Moscow on June 27, 1933. At that time he was writing a story about the building of the giant metallurgy factory in the Kuznetsky coal basin. In the 1930s, there was a wide front of developing industrialization in Russia, and the metallurgy factory in Kuznetsky was among its main construction sites.

Sudden death cut N. G. Smirnov's life short, like a sentence half-written.

I am certain that you will come to love N. G. Smirnov as much today as he was loved in Russia those many years ago.

I. Rakhanov

Translator's notes

While living in Russia, between 1996 and 1999, I often came in contact with older citizens whose younger years were spent in the midst of communism. While a few of them, usually intellectuals, mostly denounced their former government, many looked back with a certain fondness for their past.

We in the West hear endless stories about the destructiveness of communism, but we fail to be reminded that this destructiveness is limited mainly to easily corrupted government officials. The majority of citizens are real and genuine, interested in living life to its fullest. If anything, these people are more honest with one another and with themselves than those in, say, a capitalistic society, in which one is often caught up in a futile race grounded in materialism.

Nikolai Gregorevich Smirnov gives us a view of communism in its ambiguous beginnings. Like any society, we see the good and the bad. Unique to this story, however, is the notion that the ideal way of life is found when socialistic order and western knowledge are combined. Since this story was written around the time of Stalin's dreadful, mass purges, in which millions of Russians were murdered due to the government's overzealous suspicions, I fear that the author made himself a sure target for just such persecution. We are only told that Nikolai Smirnov died in Moscow in 1933. The true cause of his death, along with the millions of others killed that same year, will probably never be revealed. A portion of the story glorifies socialism but, unlike many books of the era, its faults are routinely brought into the open, as well.

In order to make the experience of Jack Vosmerkin - The American more rewarding for the reader, I want to point out a characteristic of the Russian culture where names are concerned. Russians are often called by names that contain up to three parts, as well as a nickname or two. For example, the author's name is Nikolai Grigorevich Smirnov, but we might refer to him as Nikolai Grigorevich, Nikolka Smirnov, Nikolai, Smirnov, or just by the nickname, Nikolka. In addition, our story's hero also has an American name, which is used interchangeably with his Russian name throughout the book. While some extra time may be required of you, dear reader, to assimilate who is who, you will have the opportunity to experience this unique characteristic of Russian culture, which remains unchanged today.

PART ONE

JACK VOSMERKIN

Chapter One

The editor changes his routine

"Excuse me, comrade. The 'Oil-pool'—it's all very nice—but surely a tractor does not run on coal. And, for that reason, I really don't have time..."

With these words, the editor ended his conversation with the meddlesome poet who had tried to sell his poem about the 'Oil-pool' tractor to the newspaper. The poet jumped from his chair and disappeared through the doors. The editor watched him leave without the slightest twitch of conscience.

Now, at last, he could concentrate on his own business. For this, he first moved a dish of cooling cabbage soup closer and started to eat. He ate without having much of an appetite, often bringing the spoon only close to his mouth and then returning it to the bowl. The spoon was in his left hand and, with his right, he read over an article lying before him. The door opened and once again someone entered.

"Make it short!" the editor said harshly, continuing to read and eat.

Silence. The only sound was his pen scratching away at a piece of paper.

"To be short would be difficult," said the new arrival. "To be short would be completely impossible."

"All the same. In three words."

"In three? OK. Want to eat."

The editor tore his gaze away from the draft on his desk.

Before him stood a pleasant young man in a grey velvet jacket with a yellow sheep's fur collar and a foreign-looking, machine haircut. On his head was a heavy cap with the ear flaps tied together on top. On his feet were brown shoes with thick soles. The lad carried a not-so-large, heavy cloth sack. In general, he looked fashionable and his face—cheerful. Then

he smiled, and several gold teeth in a row made his upper jaw shine. It was hard to believe that such a person was in need.

The editor had a clever idea about how to quickly show the man out of his office.

"You surely know how to read, comrade, yes?" he lectured. "This is not a cafeteria but is, in fact, the editorial offices of an agricultural newspaper..."

"I know. But, nonetheless, I want to eat."

"Last name?" the editor asked awkwardly, understanding all too well that the question threatened to complicate matters. But what could be done? The young fellow was somehow managing to win him over. Maybe it was his smile, which all the while he displayed so earnestly. Even now, before giving his answer, he offered the widest of smiles.

"My name is Jack Vosmerkin."

"Where are you from?"

"From Petersburg. I lay in the hospital there for seven weeks."

"From Leningrad," corrected the editor.

Vosmerkin's golden teeth sparkled, as if a blazing fire were in his mouth.

"No. From Petersburg."

"There is no such city."

"There is. It's in the state of Virginia, on the Richmond-Charleston line."

"Aha!" said the editor and made a phone call.

Now he knew what needed to be done and went back to reading his article. A messenger soon appeared.

Give this comrade some lunch," pronounced the editor, "and call Pichulin."

Pichulin, a specialist of Anglo-Saxon countries, showed up out of nowhere wearing round glasses and a long leather vest. Jack Vosmerkin had only just started on the soup.

"Well, uh..." said the editor, with Pichulin standing at his chair in question. "So you, comrade, are from America, from the state of Virginia? This is getting better. Wouldn't it be possible to use him, Pichulin? When did you arrive?" he asked Vosmerkin, already speaking in a friendlier, more familiar tone.

"Two weeks ago."

"Through Vladivostok?"

"No, through Murmansk."

Pichulin moved slowly toward Jack. He got out his notepad and seemed to be figuring out an equation.

"Do you think you could, by the day after tomorrow, write a 200 line article entitled, 'Unemployment Among Farm Workers in the United States?'"

Jack blushed deeply and, with some effort, swallowed a spoonful of soup.

"I write poorly in Russian. I can read an article well enough...but writing isn't one of my gifts."

"But you are Russian?"

"Yes, of course. I spent a long time in America, though."

"This is not good," said the editor, pondering.

Now he understood why Jack pronounced certain words so carefully.

"You don't know how to write," he said after a few moments. "You know Russian poorly. We have no need of such people."

The light from an electric bulb reflected off Jack's teeth.

"You don't need such people?" he reconfirmed quietly. "But I believe you do need me. It's true, I cannot write articles. But I can do other things."

"Such as?"

"For eight hours in a row I can plow with a tractor and, if it stops running, I can fix it. I can raise chickens and select eggs for an incubator. I can milk ten cows and, if you have forty, I can manage by using an electric milker. For two years I raised tobacco in Virginia and I can roll a thousand cigars a day by hand. That is, of course, if the filling has already been prepared. I'm talking about 'Virginia' cigars, at five cents apiece. Also, I used to grow strawberries as big as my fist..."

"Enough, enough!" the editor shouted.

"No, really. I am not a beggar, but a genuine harvest worker. For six years I labored at various farms and only now traveled here as a stoker on a ship. We brought cotton over here. I stealthily left the ship and took a train. Not wanting to be a fare-dodger, I spent the last of my money on a ticket. And now here I am, hungry. Just ten days here, and everyone says that nobody has any use of my skills. But the way I see it, they do."

He again flashed his golden teeth.

The editor asked, "And why the gold teeth?"

"I fell off a boiler in Dakota. As you know, those things are almost as high as a locomotive. Knocked into the wheel with my teeth. Four were missing. I had these put in for eighty dollars. They were cast from pure gold. I've already thought about pulling them out so I could eat. But before doing that I came here..."

"Very interesting," said the editor thoughtfully. "What are we going to do with you, Vosmerkin? Why did you come to the USSR?"

"Business," answered Jack, reddening.

"OK. And where are you staying?"

"Nowhere. I've slept at a shelter. But it's no good there. They laugh at my coat."

"And do you have any belongings?" asked Pichulin with a concerned tone.

"I have nothing. I traveled here without anything. It was impossible to carry anything off the ship. Only this bag here..."

"And what's in the bag?"

"Wheat. Select grains. 'Manitoba,' Markiza,' and 'Dakota.' I gathered them on different farms for four years. Now, from hunger, I've eaten one thousand two hundred of them. The very smallest, of course."

"Have some porridge instead, Vosmerkin," said the editor softly, moving the dish closer to him. "We need to think over your situation. I would be happy to chat longer with you but, unfortunately, there is no time..."

Pichulin glanced at the editor with surprise.

This man, dry and exact, had never before spoken in such a warm tone. Something happened to him. He looked at Vosmerkin and smiled.

"Yes," repeated the editor thoughtfully. "I'd be happy to chat with you..."

He got out a record book and made a few marks.

"If you like, come to my apartment today at a quarter to twelve sharp. Tell me your story. Maybe we'll think of something. Agreed?"

"Uh huh."

"And you can spend the night at my place."

"Thank you."

"Here's my address. Can you find it?"

Jack grinned.

"Well, so long..."

That night, Jack told the editor his story. A hotplate by the window rattled incessantly. They drank lots of tea. The conversation went on for three or four hours.

Jack's story was long and disjointed. In order to get a clear understanding, the editor had to ask many questions. By three in the morning, Jack had explained every detail necessary to form a clear picture. And this is what happened:

A boy and his cow

In the spring of 1918, a time of hunger began in Petrograd. Produce reserves were completely exhausted and there were no shipments of food. Thousands stood in lines in front of the bread stores. People waited for hours in order to receive a small square of dark bread the size of a matchbox. At the markets, mainly non-edibles were sold: dishes, hats, rags and furniture. For a high price, the cafe near the Admiralty sold thin, rye flat rolls, fried in flaxseed oil. All cafeterias and restaurants were closed. Even milk, always plentiful at that time of year, vanished.

Panic started in the city. It was already too late to create reserves. The hope that hunger would not continue indefinitely was all that remained. They were saying that, with the new harvest, products would appear. The war ended. Villagers returned to their villages. They needed only to wait until the autumn.

So, in order to make the hungry summer pass less painfully, a large group of intellectuals from Petrograd decided to send their children beyond the Volga river, where white bread and milk were plentiful, and from where letters told that hunger was nowhere to be found. With great difficulty, a special train was found. The train was very long and consisted of white, heated freight cars and passenger cars. The girls occupied the passenger cars, while the boys were in the freight cars. Altogether, there were about five hundred people. Traveling with them were teachers, instructors and other academic personnel. After a long, adventurous trip, the white train unloaded the children beyond the Volga, in the promised land.

The Petrograd children, it turned out, had to spend much more than one summer in this place. The Czechoslovakian uprising provoked acts of war along the railways. Then Kolchak came to power. Without warning, rail lines were cut off in many places. Full blown war broke out. Battle fronts stretched out between the parents and their children, without any possibility of crossing.

Soon, nobody paid any attention to the children, except their leaders, who were powerless to do anything. The huge group was forced to break up into smaller ones. The children and their leaders wandered off into the countryside and the villages. Necessities such as warm clothing and shoes were non-existent. It also seemed as though any hope for the future had been lost. The children became ill, were hungry and fell into despair. Jack had only heard about all of this from others. He was not a part of the group

himself. It was the autumn of 1918 when he became personally acquainted with the children of Petrograd.

A third class railcar filled with children stood at a station not far from the Volga. The Red Army had gone on the offensive and a sense of hope had arisen in the children that the Soviet troops would occupy the station before the White Army could lead their railcar away. This would give them the possibility of returning to Petrograd and to their parents in the coming days.

But circumstances became less fortunate. A group of soldiers on horseback suddenly rode up to the station. Cossacks armed with picks spread out across the railroad tracks, hunting for empty railcars. Noticing the car filled with children, a tall officer suggested that it be emptied immediately. It was needed for the officers' corp. A short-tempered instructor accompanying the children shouted that the children would not leave the car. The officer arrested the instructor and took him away, and the children were asked to get off the car without delay.

The Cossacks threw pillows, baskets and books from the windows, and a large heap of many different things was formed on a sheet of canvas. Not knowing what to do, the children, panic-stricken, just stood motionless.

The girls shed tears, while the boys tried to reassure them. They quietly whispered that soon the Red Army would arrive and everything would be all right. Suddenly, somewhere in the distance, a shot was fired.

After the first shot, a second, third and then fourth followed. An impressive cloud of smoke developed high in the sky and a hailstorm of bullets showered down on the station's metal roof. The Red Army had truly arrived. But, in advance, they had attacked with artillery.

Fourteen year-old Valery, who had binoculars and was considered to be the very smartest one in the group, yelled to run quickly to safety but, of course, that everyone go in the same direction. He grabbed his pillow and was the first to dash across the wide field which stretched out behind the station. The others followed his example. The children weaved across the field like a long piece of thread. The smallest children were at the end of the line and, in front, was Valery, covering his head from shrapnel with his pillow. Now and then he stopped and yelled:

"Hurry up!.. Damn it, hurry!"

The smaller, weaker children began to tire. They fell down and cried that they could not go any further. For a minute, everyone stopped and began a discussion. Someone said the shooting was becoming less frequent. But that was just the quiet before the storm. From one side, the Whites were

advancing with an armored train. Cannon balls exploded close by. The children cried and screamed.

The eldest carried the younger ones under their arms and again hurried forward. The field came to an end. Not far off were some yellow bushes and behind them was a ravine. The children descended into the ravine. Bullets could barely reach this spot. For some time, they moved along the bottom of the ravine. Then they stopped and counted each other. All forty were accounted for. Valery, who assumed the responsibility of commander, said everyone could sit down. The shrapnel could not fly this far. The children rested a bit, ate the provisions which they had been able to grab, drank water from a creek and again moved on. Shots could still be heard in the distance, and everyone wanted to be far away from the battlefield.

At the bottom of the ravine, the day ended early and it turned into a cold evening. The children broke twigs and placed them alongside the things which they had grabbed at the moment of escape. Some pillows were found and everyone lay close together to heat one another. Though Valery had some matches, for safety, it was decided that a fire not be started. They were afraid it might attract gunfire.

During the night, Valery and two other boys climbed out of the ravine. The sky was a reddish-orange in one direction, but not where the station was located. The boys decided, due to the glowing, that some village must be burning. They went back down into the ravine and agreed to take turns keeping guard, with rocks in hand. But the desire to sleep was too strong. The first guard fell asleep and his replacement did not wake up. In spite of this, the night passed without incident.

In the morning, the older children discussed what to do next and where to go. They debated for a long time. While the older children argued, the younger children cried out of fear and hunger. Not so much as a crumb was left from their provisions.

Finally, it was decided that they would wait in the ravine until mid-day and then, if the exchange of fire had not started up, go back to the station and look for their adult leaders. But soon, shooting resumed in the direction of the station. In despair, the children remained huddled close together and began to cry.

Just then, a snapping sound was heard from the bushes and a young peasant boy, barefoot and without a hat, appeared in front of the crying children. He was crawling on all fours and looking curiously at the children.

The crying stopped at once. The children started to look the boy over with interest. He remained on all fours and then snorted.

"Are you from around here?" Valery finally asked in a quiet voice.

"Yes," answered the boy and leapt to his feet. "From the village of Pochinka."

"Do you think you could take us to your village and feed us?"

"And how many of you are there?"

"Forty people."

"No, I can't."

"Why can't you?"

"Our village is gone. It burned during the night. The Whites burned it with fire canons. And they killed all the men, including my father. And my mother and sister were burned alive in our cottage. Only I survived. And where are you kids from?"

The children started to tell about who they were, each fighting to get a word in. When the picture became clear enough, the boy, after thinking some, said:

"Take me with you, fellas."

"What are we supposed to do with you?" asked Valery. "We don't even have anything for ourselves."

"I don't care, fellas. Without me you won't make it. I know these parts like the back of my hand so I'll come in handy. If you want, I can bring you milk."

"Where can you get milk from?"

"I have a cow with me. Her name is Pestrushka. My mother told me to save the cow. I drove her away and then our cottage started to burn. Mother tried to carry a large chest out, but the cottage burned with her and Katka inside. Only Pestrushka remains with me now. All night I cried no less than any of you, but now I'm done."

Milk, a cow—the children figured that this probably meant they were saved from starvation. They surrounded the boy from all sides.

Valery asked matter of factly:

"Could we, maybe, kill the cow with a knife and roast it? I have matches and a knife."

The boy waved his hand indignantly.

"I already said… She is the only thing I have left. Drink the milk. But I won't let you cook her."

"Do you know how to milk a cow?"

"Of course. I'll milk her if there is something to put the milk in. I don't have a container. And she is full of milk. This morning I was so hungry that I sucked some milk right from her."

The children found a container—a small bucket they had used for drinking water. Valery, four others and the boy made their way through the bushes in the bottom of the ravine and did, in fact, find the multi-colored cow, which was tied to a bush. The boy milked her, using the bucket, and the milk was divided by giving each person two swallows. The bucket was not large so it was necessary to return to milk the cow four times. After all the milk was drank, the children had a meeting, with their new comrade taking part. The same question was discussed: What to do next?

This time, all eyes were focused on the boy. Only he could save them.

"Well kids," he said, recognizing his importance, "I'll take you to the village. Maybe they'll feed you. And they might provide carts to get to town."

"But you said your village had burned," Valery interrupted.

"Wait. I won't take you to our village, but to another, Chizhy. Maybe Chizhy didn't burn. It's a big village. I only ask that you let me stay with you."

"Fine. We'll take you!" exclaimed Valery.

"We'll take you! We'll take you!" the others joined in.

"Then let's go," said the boy.

"Stop!" ordered Valery. "Just one thing before we go." And he turned to the boy, asking: "What's your name?"

"Yashka."

"OK, Yashka. Take us to Chizhy."

The children climbed out of the ravine and moved behind Yashka, who walked confidently through the field. They decided not to take the cow but, rather, to return for her in the evening if everything was all right in Chizhy.

Yashka walked next to Valery and yelled at those who fell behind. Everyone gained respect for him. The children already felt in their hearts that their situation was improving. The walk to Chizhy would be short. Yashka would guide them there, where they would be given milk and be fed. It would be possible to spend a couple days in the villagers' cottages. Then, the Reds would come and help them get back to Petrograd.

The children walked cheerfully and actually felt happy. Their rescue was near and, under Yashka's leadership, the road was clear and simple.

Jack Vosmerkin was that little, white-haired boy who saved forty kids from starvation.

The cheerful mood of the children's journey did not last for long. Yashka suddenly turned around and started to focus on something in the distance.

Then he screamed, "Everybody down!" and, crawling, he pushed his way through some bushes along the road.

The others crawled after him, although they did not know what was wrong. In the bushes, Valery asked:

"What frightened you?"

"What do you mean, what?" whispered Yashka. "Use your binoculars if you can't already see. They're looking for me and want me dead."

"Who's looking for you?"

"It's clear who—the Cossacks. There they are, on the road. Two of them have guns and picks. They're looking for me. I was the only one in the village who survived."

Valery moved the binoculars to his eyes and saw that, sure enough, along the road were two Cossacks searching the roadsides.

"Save me, fellas," whispered Yashka, shaken, "and I'll help you then."

"But how can we save you?" asked Valery.

"Give me a jacket or something to wear. They won't recognize me in city clothes and will just think I'm with you."

The children quickly realized that the city clothes would, in fact, protect this peasant boy. Valery took off his own coat and found a cap. A girl gave Yashka an extra pair of sandals. Everyone saw him as the best hope for being saved, so it was important that he be defended.

After Yashka put on the foreign clothes he immediately felt braver. He stood up and, for a long time, watched the Cossacks.

"It looks like they're going to the station," he finally said. "Let's keep moving. Maybe they aren't looking for me."

The children again stretched out along the road. Now Yashka and Valery followed up the rear. They continuously looked all around and Valery kept the binoculars glued to his eyes. Suddenly he yelled:

"Cossacks! Cossacks are coming right for us!"

This time the riders were headed straight for the group of children. To run and hide would be useless. They had been noticed. However, Valery ordered:

"Run!"

And everyone ran.

"Stop, brothers!" yelled Yashka. "We can't outrun horses. Maybe they won't touch us."

The children stopped. A young Cossack with a pick, not riding all the way up to the children, pulled on the reins of his horse.

"Are you from the station?" he shouted at the whole group.

"Yes, we are," answered Valery, stepping forward. "What do you want?"

"We were sent for you. Turn back. Our orders are that you return."

"But isn't there shooting over there?"

"No shooting. The Reds left. Well, let's go."

All of the children's hopes were instantly swept away. Now, the promise of returning to Petrograd was lost. At least, since they had been sent for, they would be fed. Maybe they would find their adult leader, but they received little gladness from this. The best they could count on was to return to their former situation.

But the Cossacks were not interested in softening to the children, and did not ask whether they wanted to go to the station or not. To get the kids to start moving, they surrounded them in a tight circle and forced them to move, whether they wanted to or not. The Cossacks did not hurry them along too unkindly, however, and only seldom yelled at the slower ones. They could see that the children were tired and hungry.

After about two hours of walking, the familiar station appeared in front of them. Their railcar was no longer on the tracks and neither were any of their belongings. The Cossacks brought the children to the commandant, a short officer with a beard.

The commandant looked sternly at the children and asked:

"Are you all here?"

"Yes, we're all here," answered Valery.

And at that moment, Yashka squatted, afraid the commandant would recognize and execute him.

"I asked about you at headquarters," said the commandant. "You've been ordered to leave the war zone. Follow me."

The kids followed the commandant. He took them to a freight car and commanded:

"Climb on in, quickly!"

"We haven't eaten today," Valery explained.

"Quiet!"

All of the children climbed on board except for Yashka, who had been looking around and thinking about running off. The commandant yelled at him and Yashka found himself on the car, as well. Then the commandant closed the door. Inside, the train car became completely dark.

Pushing each other, the kids found places on the floor or on upper bunks. After some time, the door opened. Two soldiers brought bread, a bucket of water and an iron pot of porridge. Everyone struggled to get some food and then ate greedily. All of the bread was eaten to the last crumb and not a grain of porridge remained. Even the bucket of water was completely emptied. The soldiers collected the empty containers and closed the door again.

When the soldiers' footsteps ceased to be heard in the distance, Yashka tried to open the door. But he had no luck. The door had been locked from the outside with a bolt.

After twenty or thirty minutes, the freight car jerked forcefully; the children assumed that they had become attached to a train. After a short wait, the train, without sounding a bell or horn, departed the station. At that moment, a loud cry was heard in the car. It was Yashka, who cried for the first time since meeting the others.

"What's wrong?" asked Valery. "You decided yourself to join our group. We didn't force you."

"I know," said Yashka hoarsely. "It's not about me. I'm thinking about Pestrushka. She'll die of starvation in the ravine. I'm afraid I tied her to the bush with a really strong knot..."

The editor provides a historical document

When Jack Vosmerkin reached this part of his story, the editor interrupted him.

"Stop, Vosmerkin. Rest," he said, half-heartedly. "I'll tell you what happened next."

Jack looked at the editor with surprise: Was he making fun of his story? But the editor went over to a bookshelf and selected a large bundle of old newspapers. He placed them on the table and began to look through them. Jack noticed that many articles had been circled with a red pencil.

"Here it is," the editor finally said and started to read:

America protects the children

Comrade Ruzer, representative of the train, 'Lenin,' and Comrade Vengrov, representative of the People's Comissar, have forwarded me a telegram which should not only be publicized in the Soviet press, but should also be made known to the rest of the civilized world.

Here it is:

The fate of a former group of children from Petrograd, taken from Petrograd by the Regional Council in 1918 to the Uisky station, has been revealed. Immediate intervention by the Central Authority is sought.

The group was handed over by the Kolchagov Ministry of Internal Affairs on January 28, 1919 to the completely unchallenged authority of the American Red Cross, led by Dr. Skander, Mr. Will Chekamis and the American from Moscow, Svin, with the right to move the children wherever the Americans thought proper, and to remove the Russian staff, undertaking the task of looking after the children at their own discretion.

According to the priest of the village of Yagurovky and local residents, the children were taken there in the spring of 1919.

The children lived in filthy conditions, both physically and morally speaking. They asked for mercy and begged of their neighbors to let them work for food. The Americans were busy with their business dealings; moreover, some of the children aided them as clerks in their shops.

At the end of May, before the arrival of the Reds, the Americans took the children to some unknown destination. The evacuation occurred at night after an order to get ready at two in the morning, so hurriedly that a large part of the group's things were left in the hands of fate.

The children were heard to have been taken to some Russian island close to Japan, while those 15 and older were put into active duty at the station of Kurgan.

After an inquiry on the radio by representatives of the Soviet Dept. concerning the fate of the children and their return home to their parents, on October 15th a telegram was received by a lieutenant Zaharov, which indicated that the children would be returned only after the defeat of the Bolsheviks and the establishment of a united Russia.

We are sending materials and documents with Ostrovsky, a representative of the People's Commissar of Internal Affairs.

Take notice that the children, taken to ally towns, are made up of only non-proletarians.

The People's Commissar, of course, has been concerned about the fate of these children. The parents have repeatedly asked us about installing some kind of means of communication with their children. But I have had the impression that these parents, with leanings to intervene, have more faith in, if not Kolchak, then the American Red Cross, than in us.

The coarse behavior of the Americans should serve as a lesson, not only for the parents of their unfortunate, imprisoned children, but for everyone irresolute in Russia. Children of the proletarian group taken to the Ufimsky region were collected by the Red Army and returned to Moscow and Petrograd.

I know that the parents of these children, taken somewhere in Japan, have truly missed them and have ardently tried to reach them. If not for the intervention of the Americans, their children would already be back in the arms of their mothers. Now, babies have been taken away, God only knows why and where, and under the worst of conditions.

The Council for the Protection of Children has a telegraph communication stating that, during the well-known evacuation, about which the above telegram relates, a girl drowned and another became very ill. Also appalling is that children from 15 years of age were forcefully taken into the Kolchakov Army.

All of this is such a nightmare and so awkward that only a real outburst of rage against us and our victories could explain this step from the Americans. A cultural explanation of this could conclude that the Americans are saving the children from the corruption of the Bolsheviks. Let the older ones die in the ranks of the Kolchakov Army, let the younger ones drown and die of hunger, let them be given to slavery, but just don't let them turn out to be Socialists.

-People's Commissar of Education, Lunacharsky

"Uh huh," said Jack Vosmerkin, when the editor had finished reading the article. "By the spring, we had already been taken to the village of Yagurovka. And then we were taken further."

He took the article and read through it again, moving his lips. Then, as if recalling something, he said softly, "Now I remember why they hadn't left us in Siberia. I had never before understood. Except for the kids from Petrograd, there were surely Siberians among us. Altogether, almost eight hundred kids were gathered. When Kolchak was defeated, we came from all different places to the city of Tyrgoyansk. Here, they loaded us up on trains and took us to Vladivostok. The Americans were in charge of everything. They gave us American overcoats to wear, which were too long for us then and had to be shortened with scissors. The older kids were held back for military service, including Valery. But many 13-year-olds like me remained. During the winter we'd been cold and hungry so we were glad they were taking us somewhere. In the train car we often talked about what the future might hold for us. There were many ideas, but nobody thought they would actually take us to America. There was no reason to do so."

"However, that's what happened?" asked the editor.

"That's what happened."

"OK. Then continue your story where you left off."

And Jack Vosmerkin started to tell what happened next.