



Chapter VI

PREPARING FOR AMERICAN DEPORTEES



EVENTS in Moscow, quickly following each other, were full of interest. I wanted to remain in that vital city, but as I had left all my effects in Petrograd I decided to return there and then come back to Moscow to join Lunacharsky in his work. A few days before my departure a young woman, an Anarchist, came to visit me. She was from the Petrograd Museum of the Revolution and she called to inquire whether I would take charge of the Museum branch work in Moscow. She explained that the original idea of the Museum was due to the famous old revolutionist Vera Nikolaievna Figner, and that it had recently been organized by non-partisan elements. The majority of the men and women who worked in the Museum were not Communists, she said; but they were devoted to the Revolution and anxious to create something which could in the future serve as a source of information and inspiration to earnest students of the great Russian Revolution. When my caller was informed that I was about to return to Petrograd, she invited me to visit the Museum and to become acquainted with its work.

Upon my arrival in Petrograd I found unexpected work awaiting me. Zorin informed me that he had been notified by Tchicherin that a thousand Russians had been deported from America and were on their way to Russia. They were to be met at the border and quarters were to be immediately prepared for them in Petrograd. Zorin asked me to join the Commission about to be organized for that purpose.

The plan of such a commission for American deportees had been broached to Zorin soon after our arrival in Russia. At that time Zorin directed us to talk the matter over with Tchicherin, which we did. But three months passed without anything having been done about it. Meanwhile, our comrades of the *Buford* were still walking from department to department, trying to be placed where they might do some good. They were a sorry lot, those men who had come to Russia with such high hopes, eager to render service to the revolutionary people. Most of them were skilled workers, mechanics--men Russia needed badly; but the cumbersome Bolshevik machine and general inefficiency made it a very complex matter to put them to work. Some had tried independently to secure jobs, but they could accomplish very little. Moreover, those who found employment were soon made to feel that the Russian workers resented the eagerness and intensity of their brothers from America. "Wait till you have starved as long as we," they would say, "wait till you have tasted the blessings of Commissarship, and we will see if you are still so eager." In every way the deportees were discouraged and their enthusiasm dampened.

To avoid this unnecessary waste of energy and suffering the Commission was at last organized in Petrograd. It consisted of Ravitch, the then Minister of Internal Affairs for the Northern District; her secretary, Kaplun; two members of the Bureau of War Prisoners; Alexander Berkman and myself. The new deportees were due in two weeks, and much work was to be done to prepare for their reception. It was unfortunate that no active participation could be expected from Ravitch because her time was too much occupied. Besides holding the post of Minister of the Interior she was Chief of the Petrograd Militia, and she also represented the Moscow Foreign Office in Petrograd. Her regular working hours were from 8 A.M. to 2 A.M. Kaplun, a very able administrator, had charge of the entire internal work of the Department and could therefore give us very little of his time. There remained only four persons to accomplish within a short time the big task of preparing living quarters for a thousand deportees in starved and ruined Russia. Moreover, Alexander Berkman, heading the Reception Committee, had to leave for the Latvian border to meet the exiles.

It was an almost impossible task for one person, but I was very anxious to save the second group of deportees the bitter experiences and the disappointments of my fellow companions of the *Buford*. I could undertake the work only by making the condition that I be given the right of entry to the various government departments, for I had learned by that time how paralyzing was the effect of the bureaucratic red tape which delayed and often frustrated the most earnest and energetic efforts. Kaplun consented. "Call on me at any time for anything you may require," he said; "I will give orders that you be admitted everywhere and supplied with everything you need. If that should not help, call on the Tcheka," he added. I had never called upon the police before, I informed him; why should I do so in revolutionary Russia? "In bourgeois countries that is a different matter," explained Kaplun; "with us the Tcheka defends the Revolution and fights sabotage." I started on my work determined to do without the Tcheka. Surely there must be other methods, I thought.

Then began a chase over Petrograd. Materials were very scarce and it was most difficult to procure them owing to the unbelievably centralized Bolshevik methods. Thus to get a pound of nails one had to file applications in about ten or fifteen bureaus; to secure some bed linen or ordinary dishes one wasted days. Everywhere in the offices crowds of Government employees stood about smoking cigarettes, awaiting the hour when the tedious task of the day would be over. My co-workers of the War Prisoners' Bureau fumed at the irritating and unnecessary delays, but to no purpose. They threatened with the Tcheka, with the concentration camp, even with *raztrel* (shooting). The latter was the most favourite argument. Whenever any difficulty arose one immediately heard *raztreliat*--to be shot. But the expression, so terrible in its significance, was gradually losing its effect upon the people: man gets used to everything.

I decided to try other methods. I would talk to the employees in the departments about the vital interest the conscious American workers felt in the great Russian Revolution, and of their faith and hope in the Russian proletariat. The people would become interested immediately, but the questions they would ask were as strange as they were pitiful: "Have the people enough to eat in America? How soon will the Revolution be there? Why did you come to starving Russia?" They were eager for information and news, these mentally and physically starved people, cut off by the barbarous blockade from all touch with the western world. Things American were something wonderful to them. A piece of chocolate or a cracker were unheard-of dainties--they proved the key to everybody's heart.

Within two weeks I succeeded in procuring most of the things needed for the expected deportees, including furniture, linen, and dishes. A miracle, everybody said.

However, the renovation of the houses that were to serve as living quarters for the exiles was not accomplished so easily. I inspected what, as I was told, had once been first-class hotels. I found them located in the former prostitute district; cheap dives they were, until the Bolsheviks closed all brothels.

They were germ-eaten, ill-smelling, and filthy. It was no small problem to turn those dark holes into a fit habitation within two weeks. A coat of paint was a luxury not to be thought of. There was nothing else to do but to strip the rooms of furniture and draperies, and have them thoroughly cleaned and disinfected.

One morning a group of forlorn-looking creatures, in charge of two militiamen, were brought to my temporary office. They came to work, I was informed. The group consisted of a one-armed old man, a consumptive woman, and eight boys and girls, mere children, pale, starved, and in rags. "Where do these unfortunates come from?" "They are speculators," one of the militiamen replied; "we rounded them up on the market." The prisoners began to weep. They were no speculators, they protested; they were starving, they had received no bread in two days. They were compelled to go out to the market to sell matches or thread to secure a little bread. In the midst of this scene the old man fainted from exhaustion, demonstrating better than words that he had speculated only in hunger. I had seen such "speculators" before, driven in groups through the streets of Moscow and Petrograd by convoys with loaded guns pointed at the backs of the prisoners.

I could not think of having the work done by these starved creatures. But the militiamen insisted that they would not let them go; they had orders to make them work. I called up Kaplun and informed him that I considered it out of the question to have quarters for American deportees prepared by Russian convicts whose only crime was hunger. Thereupon Kaplun ordered the group set free and consented that I give them of the bread sent for the workers' rations. But a valuable day was lost.

The next morning a group of boys and girls came singing along the Nevski Prospekt. They were *kursanti* from the Tauride Palace who were sent to my office to work. On my first visit to the palace I had been shown the quarters of the *kursanti*, the students of the Bolshevik academy. They were mostly village boys and girls housed, fed, clothed, and educated by the Government, later to be placed in responsible positions in the Soviet régime. At the time I was impressed by the institutions, but by April I had looked somewhat beneath the surface. I recalled what a young woman, a Communist, had told me in Moscow about these students. "They are the special caste now being reared in Russia," she had said. "Like the church which maintains and educates its religious priesthood, our Government trains a military and civic priesthood. They are a favoured lot." I had more than one occasion to convince myself of the truth of it. The *kursanti* were being given every advantage and many special privileges. They knew their importance and they behaved accordingly.

Their first demand when they came to me was for the extra rations of bread they had been promised. This demand satisfied, they stood about and seemed to have no idea of work. It was evident that whatever else the *kursanti* might be taught, it was not to labour. But, then, few people in Russia know how to work. The situation looked hopeless. Only ten days remained till the arrival of the deportees, and the "hotels" assigned for their use were still in as uninhabitable a condition as before. It was no use to threaten with the Tcheka, as my co-workers did. I appealed to the boys and girls in the spirit of the American deportees who were about to arrive in Russia full of enthusiasm for the Revolution and eager to join in the great work of reconstruction. The *kursanti* were the pampered charges of the Government, but they were not long from the villages, and they had had no time to become corrupt. My appeal was effective. They took up the work with a will, and at the end of ten days the three famous hotels were as ready as far as willingness to work and hot water without soap could make them. We were very proud of our achievement and we eagerly awaited the arrival of the deportees.

At last they came, but to our great surprise they proved to be no deportees at all. They were Russian war prisoners from Germany. The misunderstanding was due to the blunder of some official in Tchicherin's office who misread the radio information about the party due at the border. The prepared hotels were

locked and sealed; they were not to be used for the returned war prisoners because "they were prepared for American deportees who still might come." All the efforts and labour had been in vain.