

LIFE IN THE KOLYMA GULAG

The Work of Nikolai Getman

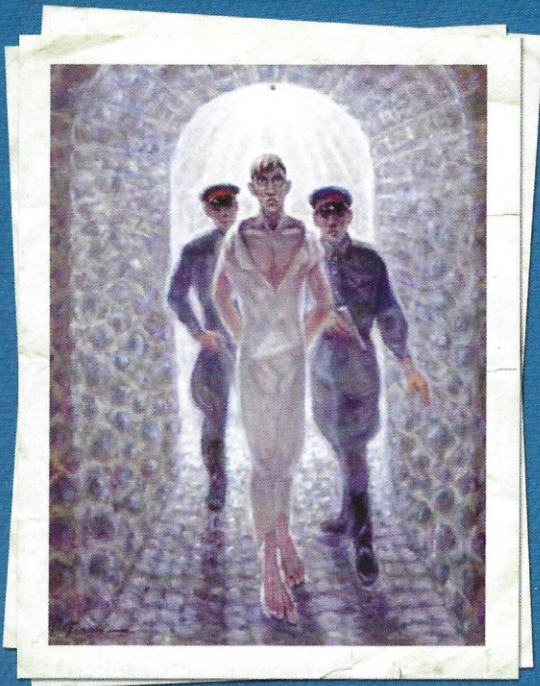
Nikolai Getman, an artist from Kharkiv, Ukraine, was a political prisoner in camps in Siberia and Kolyma from 1946 to 1953. He and a group of friends were arrested for "anti-Soviet propaganda and agitation" after one of them drew a picture of Stalin on a cigarette box. He survived eight years in the camps, witnessing firsthand some of the depths of Soviet cruelty. After his release in 1953, he began secretly painting his Gulag experiences. It was so dangerous to do so that he did not even tell his wife. "I undertook the task because I was convinced that it was my duty to leave behind a testimony to the fate of the millions of prisoners who died," he wrote. There are 50 paintings in the collection, first shown in 1993, that depict the Siberian climate, terrible working conditions, and harsh treatment of prisoners. Getman's work is one of the few artistic representations of the Kolyma Gulag.

"Getman Paintings: The Soviet GULAG @ Heritage Foundation.

ARREST

"In the NKVD's Dungeon"

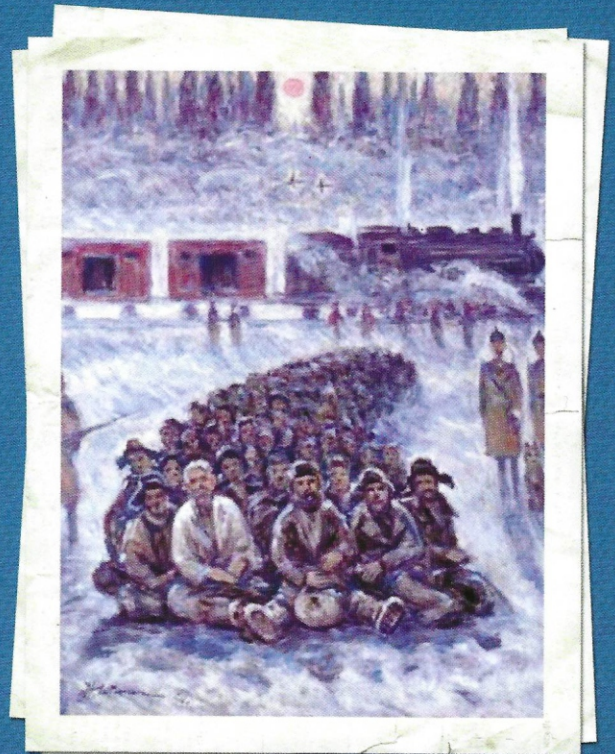
Thousands of arrested people were led down a dim corridor to be executed in a courtyard or basement, shot in the back of the neck. Dedicated to Aleksandr Getman, the artist's brother, who was executed in 1934 by the NKVD, this painting is one of the only scenes that Getman did not witness.



TRANSPORT

"Moving Out"

Millions of prisoners traveled on the Trans-Siberian Railroad to the camps. For the 15-day journey across Russia, 50-60 people were crowded into each cattle car. Water was provided only once every 3-4 days. When food was offered to the prisoners, it was salt herring, which made their thirst worse. Many died along the way, their bodies discarded along the tracks. Those who made it to the camps were emaciated by the time they arrived. The prisoners in this painting are seated on the snow in groups of five during a stop. In the Gulag, prisoners were often sorted into groups of fives.



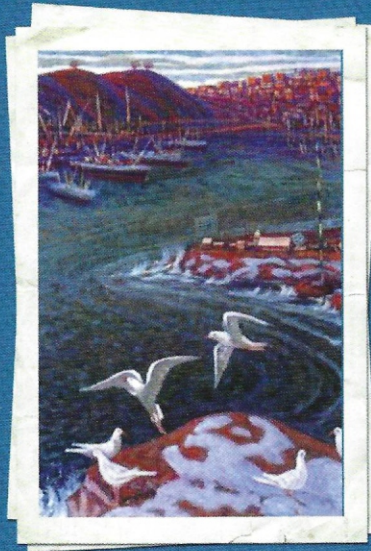
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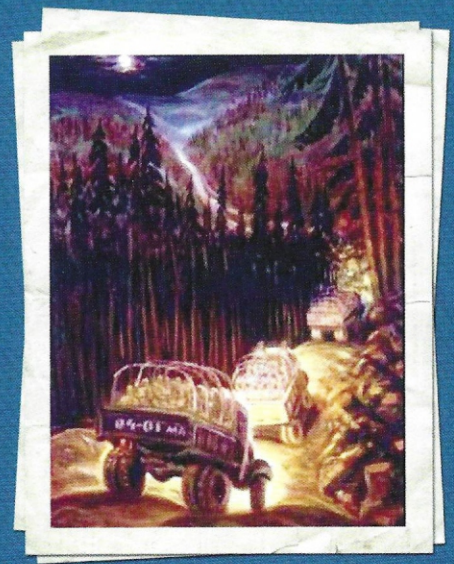
"I Remember the Port in Vanino"

Nikolai Getman, left, at 28 years old, was sent by freight train to the coast, then boarded one of the ships that would carry 6,000 prisoners at a time to labor camps in Kolyma.



"Magadan's Port: Nagaevo"

The entry port to Kolyma in spring, when the snow is melting away. The migratory birds are a symbol of freedom.



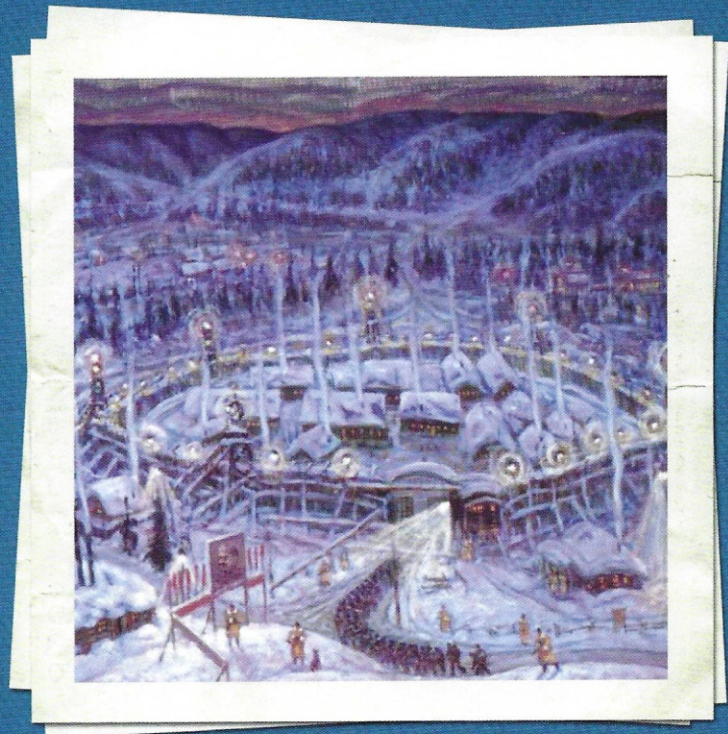
"Headed for the Kolyma"

Once the prisoners arrived, they were transported to their camps in the mountains in the back of an open truck at night. Temperatures were often below freezing.

ARRIVAL

"Upper Debin Camp"

Getman served time in the Upper Debin Camp, which housed political prisoners. There are stoves in all the barracks. You can see the guards' houses in the distance outside the camp. The prisoners pass a large poster of Stalin, and two bodies of executed prisoners in front of the gate, left as a warning to the prisoners not to escape.



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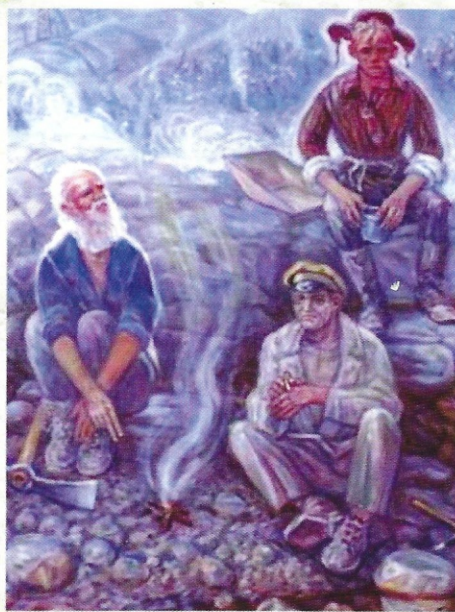
"First Group of Five Move Out"

Female prisoners lined up in groups of five are hearing their work assignments for the day. Armed guards escorted groups to their work sites and back. One prisoner stands near a guard; she has special privileges, meaning that she has made compromises to get them. Women like this were hated by their inmates, and their power was short-lived, as the guards would cast them aside when their usefulness was over.



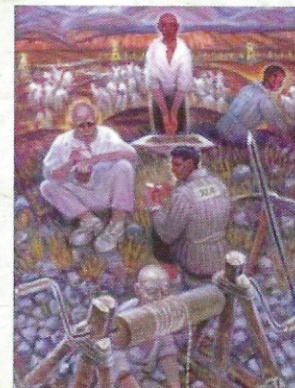
"Butara"

Malnourished prisoners are extracting gold from the sand at Butara, a gold-field. For 12 to 16 hours a day, the guards urged the prisoners to "Move, move!" If they didn't, their food ration would be reduced.



"The Preacher"

The old Orthodox Christian on the left (his beard and fingers give him away), convicted for his beliefs, sits on the ground and encourages other prisoners.



"Prisoners at Rest"

Resting was not free in the Gulag. For every minute they rested, prisoners had to add another minute of work to their 14-hour day. They could not speak freely, lest the guards punish them for anti-Soviet sentiments. Getman arranged his subjects here like a cross, as a tribute to the enormous burdens they bore.

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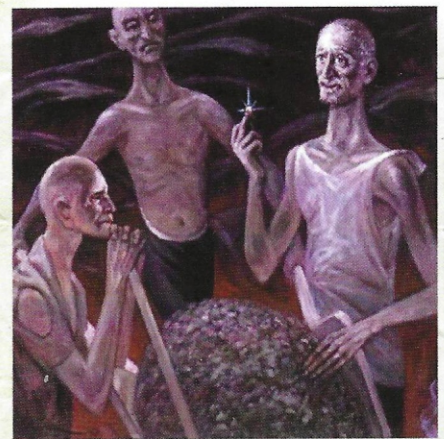
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WORK



"Working in a Gold Mine"

Prisoners were given only small rations for the day - a piece of bread and sometimes vegetable porridge. The older prisoner at the table only small portions at a time, which makes it last longer. The younger man, probably a newcomer to the camps, seems to have already finished his whole ration.

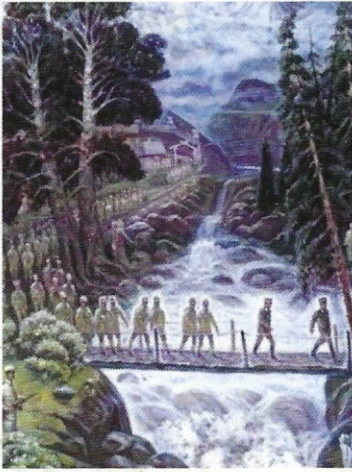


"A Diamond Mine"

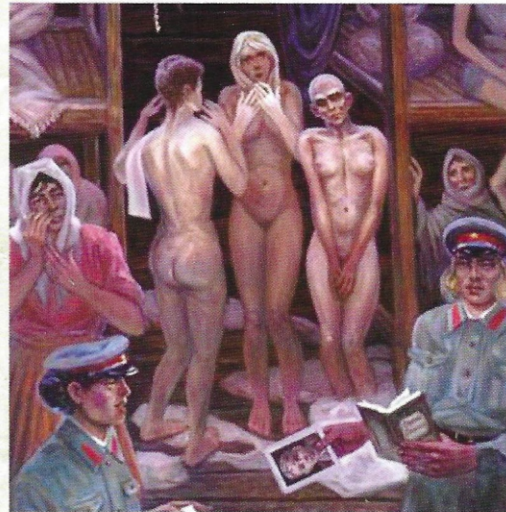
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LIFE



"Siberian Work Camp"



"A Search: They Find a Book of Esenin's Poetry"

Female guards search a women's barracks and strip-search three prisoners.

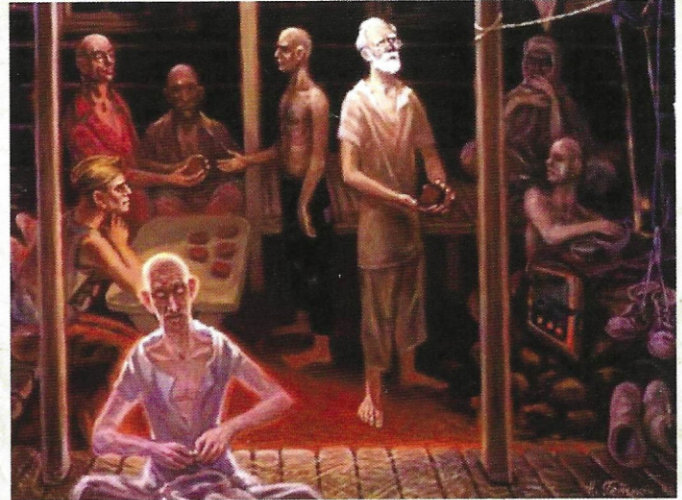
Arbitrary searches of the prisoners' barracks were common, and the guards cared little about the prisoners' privacy. If the guards discovered contraband, like a book by a forbidden author, the prisoner's sentence might be lengthened by five or ten more years in the prison camps.

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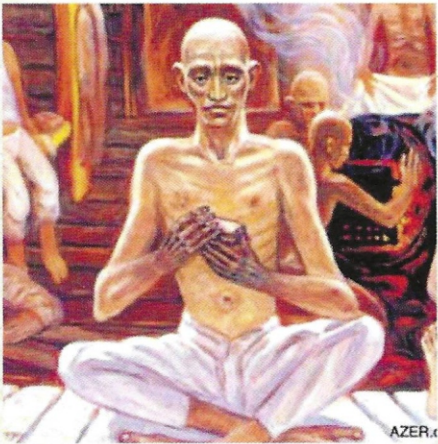
"Convict's Bread Ration"

Since the prisoners were kept so hungry, receiving a smaller ration could mean life or death for a prisoner. Thus, distribution of rations involved a specific method to keep peace between the prisoners. The prisoner in the foreground has his back to the food rations, so he can't see portion size (he is distracting himself by ridding his bed of lice). He calls out names of prisoners, and another prisoner (in the background) gives the bread to the prisoners.



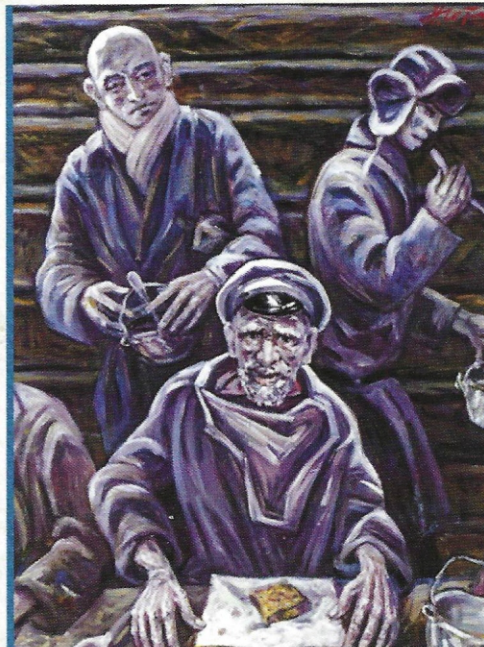
"Dead Man's Bread Ration"

A prisoner sits beside the dead body of another prisoner, eating his bread ration. Sometimes prisoners would hide the death of a bunkmate or someone in the barracks for several days so they could get an extra portion of food.



"Prisoners Eating"

Prisoners were given only small rations for the day - a piece of bread and sometimes vegetable porridge. The older prisoner at the table only small portions at a time, which makes it last longer. The younger man, probably a newcomer to the camps, seems to have already finished his whole ration.



FOOD

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PERIL

"Waiting to Get Shot"

Executions were sudden and could happen at any time, without apparent cause. In this painting, a group of 159 men were from their barracks in the middle of the night and executed by the NKVD (the Soviet secret police).



"Returning to Camp"

As prisoners return in their columns of five from a day's work, they are weak and tired. An old man has fallen down, and a guard inspects another who has to be aided back to camp.



"The Guard's Kennel"

The guards treated their dogs better than the prisoners. The prisoners were jealous of the dogs' food bowls, which were full of meat while they were merely given bread. The dogs guarded the prisoners and were trained to maul anyone who escaped from camp.

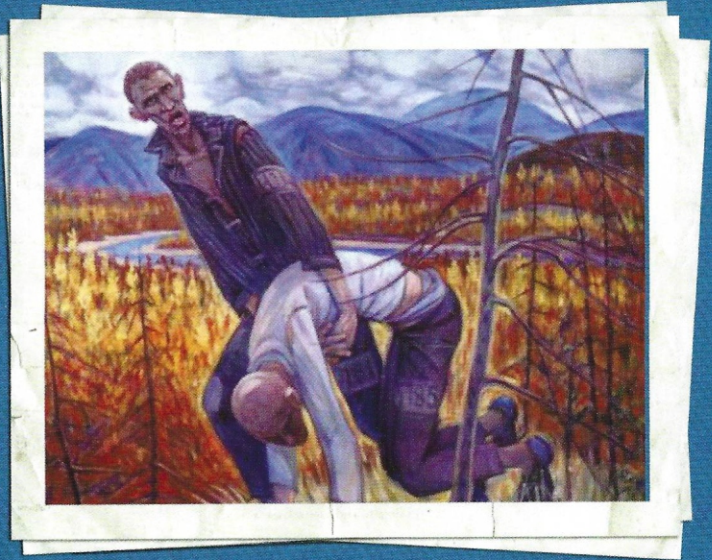


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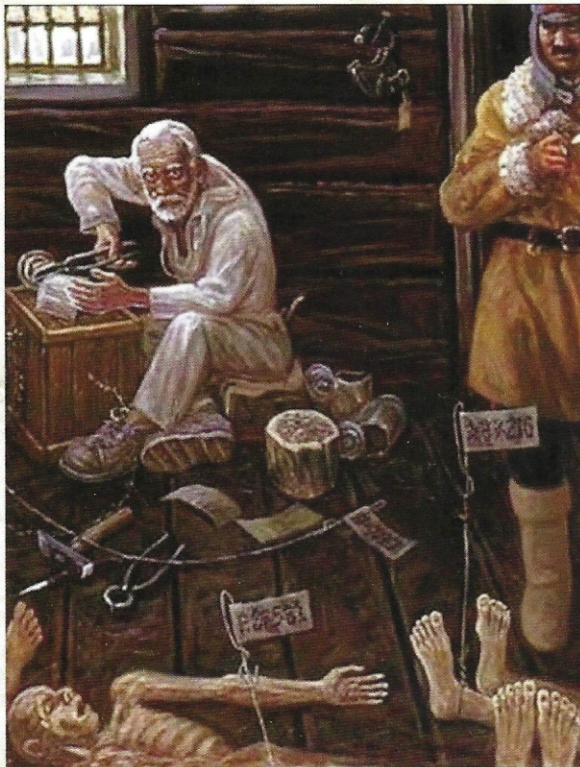
"Recaptured Prisoners"

Running away from a life sentence in Siberia was tempting, but the camps were in remote areas, and chances of survival were slim. The two men painted here escaped and were recaptured. They each received an additional 25-years in the Gulag.



"Self-Inflicted Wounds"

This painting shows a prisoner using an explosive on his hand. Some prisoners harmed themselves to end their misery or get a break from work. If they did so, they were sometimes subjected to special cells where they would languish without rations, heat, or medical help.



"Toe-Tags"

Ivan Pavlovsky, a Russian engineer whom Getman met in the camps, made ID tags for dead prisoners bearing only their prisoner number. He made the tags of tin cans, and fastened them to a toe with barbed wire, carefully removing each barb on the wire he used out of respect for the dead, so their bodies would not be further mutilated while in his care. The bodies were stored in the snow outside of camp. When it was windy, the toe tags clanged like wind chimes, an eerie reminder to the living of how close death was.

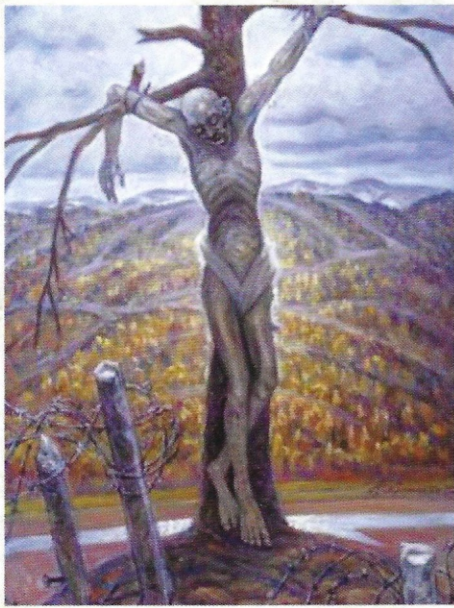
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DEATH

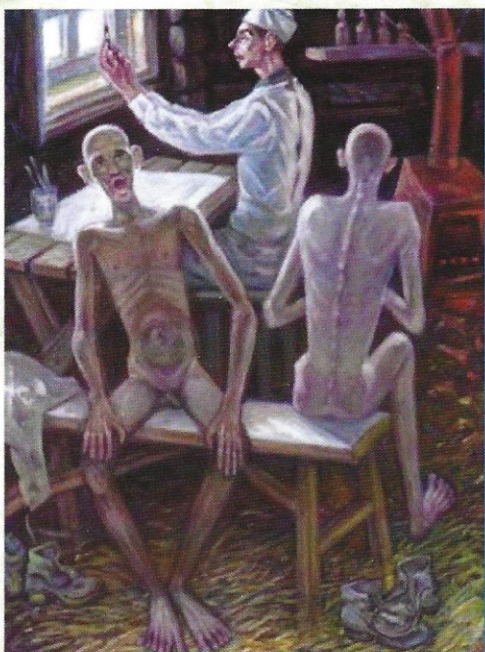
"Punishment By Mosquitoes"

A means of torture, prisoners could be stripped of their clothing, hung from a pine tree, and left to be eaten by mosquitoes. This was done beyond the barbed wire of the camp, in full view of the other prisoners. Mosquito swarms in the Arctic are enough to torment and kill a human.



"Some may say that the Gulag is a forgotten part of history and that we do not need to be reminded. But I have witnessed monstrous crimes. It is not too late to talk about them and reveal them. It is essential to do so. Some have expressed fear on seeing some of my paintings that I might end up in Kolyma again—this time for good. But the people must be reminded...of one of the harshest acts of political repression in the Soviet Union. My paintings may help achieve this."

- Nikolai Getman



"Scurvy Victims"

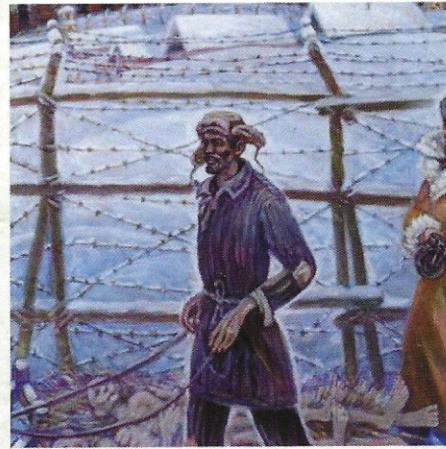
Because of the inadequate rations, prisoners often began to feel the effects of malnutrition within a month or two at camp. This resulted in cases of scurvy and dystrophy. One victim remembered that prisoners' "teeth would drop out of their mouth like stones." Doctors determined who could no longer work, and these prisoners were put into medical barracks to await their death. They were replaceable, as new prisoners arrived regularly.

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"Last Rites"

A prisoner is transporting by sled the bodies of dead prisoners to be buried in the hills. Political prisoners, or "zeks," were buried naked, identified only by a tag attached to their toe containing their prisoner number. Many died of exposure and starvation. Supposedly, the bodies of those who had starved to death were so light that several of them could be picked up at a time.



"Eternal Memory in the Permafrost"

The painting depicts the burial of two prisoners, one Russian and one Japanese POW, buried side by side. The permafrost was too hard for grave digging, so in wintertime, bodies were placed beneath blocks of ice. Those performing the burial are other prisoners, not guards, who are paying their respects to the faiths of both prisoners: one is using a Russian Orthodox cross, and another has his hands folded in a Buddhist prayer. Prisoners developed unity with people of other nationalities and faiths in the Gulag, where common suffering was an equalizer.

"Magadan Hills (Golgotha)"

After gold was discovered in 1932, the city of Magadan was founded. Soviet prisoners were brought in to build roads from Magadan to the gold. The project led to a huge loss of life, and prisoners' bodies were often buried right in the road, since digging graves was too difficult in the frozen soil. The hills in the background look like those that the prisoners made 40-50 trips up and down with the wheelbarrows, and the skulls represent the huge numbers of prisoners who died. The eclipsed sun hints at the evil that led to the cruel death of many innocent victims, like Jesus at Golgotha.

