

contains mesmerizing details of his “journey” in cargo trains, the stripping off of his old clothes, the physical examination, the first bath in a common bathhouse, and then the distribution of the one-size-fits-all prisoners’ uniforms which did not fit any of them. Suren Ghazaryan likewise described with a tender romanticism similar scenes of disgrace and humiliation, as when a group of detainees were stripped naked outdoors in the freezing snow and sent on foot to what they expected to be their execution. But it turned out to be their first bath in a bathhouse of the Solovetsky prison complex.¹⁹ I imagine my father found himself in similar situations.

Gurgen Mahari spoke with touching detail of his shock and distress when, for the first time after years in the labor camp, he saw himself in a mirror, a rare or rather nonexistent item where he had been. Years of torture, suffering and malnutrition had wreaked havoc on his body. Given my father’s emaciated appearance when he finally came home, that must be what he too had experienced in the labor camp.

There is another poignant scene in Mahari’s autobiography, a “happy feast” that took place on a New Year’s Eve when one of the inmates received a parcel from home and the whole barracks gathered to share the hot tea sweetened with sugar, another rare commodity in the prison camps.²⁰ How many New Year’s Eves did

19 Ghazaryan, «Դա չպետք է կրկնվի» (That should not be repeated), pp. 115–117. The Solovetsky Archipelago in the White Sea near Arkhangelsk was one of the first Soviet prison camps.

20 See «Սև մարդը» (The black man), in Ajemyan (ed.), «Սիբիրական» (Of Siberia, or The Siberian), p. 174.