

my father spend, hungry and cold, lonely and forgotten, without hope of receiving anything from home?

Many memoirs mention that once in a while a prisoner would receive a parcel from home, usually containing warm clothes, tobacco and non-perishables like sugar. That “blessing” was often followed by a tragic scene in the barracks as other inmates, miserable and envious, would gather around the recipient in the hope of receiving a crumb and more importantly, of inhaling his smoke or cadging a drag or bumming the butts of his *makhorka*.²¹ Apparently, tobacco was in high demand in the camps: it was far more important than bread. My father was a smoker. Did he have to beg others for a smoke, since receiving parcels from home was something impossible for him?

My father never had the chance to go into such details. But read the memoirs of those who survived and returned home, like Suren Ghazaryan, Gurgen Mahari, Suren Oganessian, Valter Aramyan and others, and you will learn what life was like in the barracks and on the forced labor sites of the Gulag. Prisoners cheated, spied on other prisoners and informed their superiors in order to earn a meager favor, sometimes as meager as a hundred extra grams of bread. That was the way of life. It was literally the survival of the fittest, and if you succumbed to the hardship, the hunger and the freezing cold winters and died, burial was a luxury denied to you. They would strip you naked—your clothing would

21 Cigarettes of *nicotiana rustica*, a strong type of tobacco.