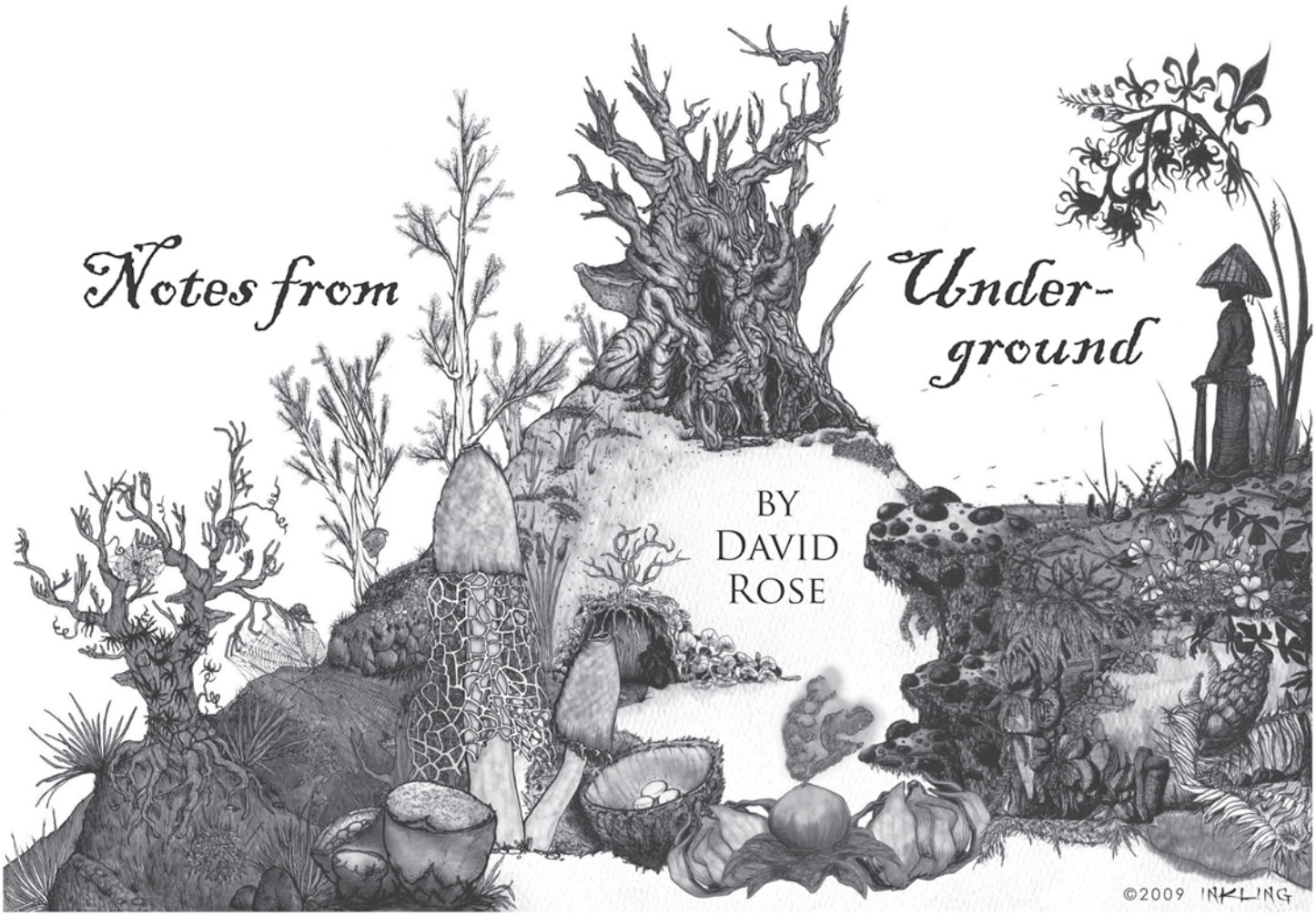


The Kolyma Psychosis

Part 4: Mushrooms in the Back of Beyond

The future is certain – only the past is unpredictable.
– Russian proverb

Editor's Note

David Rose's essay, "The Kolyma Psychosis," on the origins of mycophilia in Russia, has appeared in four consecutive issues of FUNGI; this is the fourth and final installment. "The Kolyma Psychosis" traces the role of fungi in Russian history from the importance of mushroom foraging in peasant economy to the politics of mycology in Soviet science.

In the years after World War II, the civilized world, or what remained of it, struggled to come to terms with the enormity of the Holocaust. The word "Holocaust," referring to the Nazi genocide of the Jews during the war, did not really enter common usage until the 1960s. The word "Holodomor" has been even less familiar to most people. *Holodomor* is a Ukrainian word referring to the Great Ukrainian Famine of 1932 to 1933 that killed millions in the Soviet Ukraine. The Holodomor has been called the "Ukrainian Holocaust," known as a "man-made" famine. The man responsible was the Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin, General Secretary of the Communist Party of the USSR.

The vast territory of eastern Europe in which these catastrophes prevailed was designated "bloodlands" by Yale historian Timothy Snyder. His book, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (2010), is a mind-numbing but essential historical account of mass starvation in the 1930s and 1940s. In suffocating detail Snyder correctly charges the Nazi and Soviet regimes with the murder of fourteen million people by starvation. The territory designated as the bloodlands extended from central Poland to western Russia, from the Baltic Sea in the north to the Black Sea in the south, from Berlin to Moscow. It included Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. Most of the killing did not occur in concentration camps; rather, people were denied food. The two greatest mass starvations were the Holodomor and Hitler's starvation of Soviet prisoners of war. With Stalin's plan of collectivization of agriculture in the 1930s, peasants were

required to sacrifice their plots of land to join large collective farms. When they resisted, their food was taken. With collectivization food had become a weapon to control, ultimately to starve, the peasantry. Likewise, when the German Wehrmacht surrounded three million Soviet soldiers after its invasion of the USSR in 1941, these millions perished by starvation at Hitler's orders. *Bloodlands* presents a "human geography of victims" in a time of unspeakable evil in which the Nazi and Soviet regimes were mirror images of each other.[1]

Reflect on this: how might we begin to comprehend the experience of these deaths and the grief of millions of families who lost loved ones to war, murderous persecution, famine-by-design, and genocide? And how might such reflection inhere in our fascinated love of forests that live and breathe, whose wonders are the multitudes of mushrooms that emerge as the fruiting bodies of the bloodlands? How do we begin to ponder the cosmic implications and transcendent answers to these questions? The answers will never arrive. Their meaning lies somewhere in the back of beyond.

The "back of beyond" is the terminal zone reserved for those exiled to the bottom of the barrel. In his autobiography *Safe Conduct*, Boris Pasternak pointed out that the back of beyond referred to Kamchatka, that faraway peninsula in far eastern Siberia, and then applied to the back bench in Russian schools, "where the worst members of the class used to sit."[2] The conflation of the *ultima thule* of Siberia with the carceral meaning of a schoolroom dunce corner derives from the Russian propensity of seeing the world as a battleground between Good and Evil. That battleground has received playful and ironic treatment in Russian folklore: mushrooms are commonly associated with militarism and warfare in literature, music, and cinema. In Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, French spies were called *champignons*, and notorious heads of state were often compared to mushrooms. Cossacks during the Napoleonic wars feasted on the ascomycete *Bulgaria inquinans* during the occupation of the allied armies after Waterloo.[3] In Ernst Juenger's anti-Hitlerian parable, *On the Marble Cliffs*, beneficent mushrooms morph into their horrific opposites: fiery red mushrooms as the juggernaut of war. The protagonist of Zinovy Zinik's *The Mushroom Picker* (1984) is arrested for picking mushrooms on a missile base. Modest Mussorgsky's etude "Gathering Mushrooms" and Sergei Prokofiev's fantasy "Tanya and the Mushroom Kingdom" begin to seem innocent by comparison.

The most celebrated composition on this theme was Igor Stravinsky's "How the Mushrooms Mobilized for War" (1904), a popular children's song for bass and piano. It had several antecedents: a collection of Ukrainian children's songs in 1872 and a painting "War of the Mushrooms" by Elena Polenova. Her Slavic tale "The Strong Man of the Forest" featured a contest of a triad of mushrooms associated with oak, birch, and moss. "How the Mushrooms Mobilized for War" is an homage to Russian nationalism but easily interpreted as a "satire on militarism and the inequities of conscription."[4] The tune begins with *Boletus edulis*, the supreme commander, directing all the other mushrooms to war. The honey agaric, fly agaric, morel, granulated boletus, and milk caps unite in refusal, but the resin milk caps agree to go and defeat all the mushrooms. In some versions a beetle is the pugnacious creature ready to fight. Primo Levi put forward a similar parody, this one involving insects: lice are the infantry; fleas, artillery; mosquitoes, air force; bedbugs, parachutists; and cockroaches are the sappers (combat engineers). And look closely at the louse marked with a red spot on its thorax – it is actually the hammer and sickle, the international symbol of communism.

These metaphoric, militaristic mushrooms populated cinema as well. The filmmaker Alexander Rou directed several popular Soviet fantasy films including *Vasilisa the Beautiful* (1939) and *The Golden Hours* (1973). During the war he directed *Kaschei the Immortal* that premiered on Victory Day in 1945.

"We are coming. We are coming. We will annihilate the entire bourgeoisie!" *Murzilka*, Russian children's magazine, 1924.

The film portrays the death-defying magician Kaschei, an evil figure from Slavic folklore, in an allegory of the German invasion. The hero, Nikita Kozhemykaka, sets out to learn who is responsible for the devastation of the Russian homeland. Nikita is aided by a bearded Amanita, whose hat (pileus) confers invisibility. In folktales the *mukhomor* was a metaphor for aggression and even communist retribution. In the Russian children's magazine *Murzilka*, founded in 1924, the longest running children's magazine in history, a red *mukhomor* horde is depicted marching out of the forest chanting: *"We are coming! We are coming! We will exterminate the entire bourgeoisie!"*[5]

The elite of communist party officials, scientists, and creative artists at the apex of Soviet society enjoyed privileges unavailable to the proletarian masses. Some lived ostentatiously. This was most evident regarding food and diet. Food was the foundation of life and a symbol of achievement, but in the Soviet Union the ideological character of food betrayed its class divisions, especially in times of scarcity. In 1939 the USSR Ministry of Food issued the *Book of Tasty and Healthy Food*, replacing not

1 Snyder, Timothy; *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin*, 2010, Basic Books.
2 Pasternak, Boris; *Safe Conduct*, 1949, New Directions, p. 76.
3 "Mushrooms Popular," *New York Tribune*, November 18, 1904, p. 8.
4 Taruskin, Richard; *Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions*, 1996, Oxford, p. 143.
5 *Murzilka*, 1924; see Ruslania.com.

only the culinary bible *A Gift to Young Housewives* by Elena Molokhovets, but also, lesser known, *The Gastronomic Notebooks of St. Petersburg*, an epicure's delight, of which only 100 copies were printed.[6] The *Book of Tasty and Healthy Food* was swollen with the propaganda of "Victorious Stalinism." Each recipe promised the plenitude of communist life and the benefits of living in a worker's paradise. Most recipes using mushrooms called for "any mushroom," not favorite varieties. From the *Gastronomic Notebooks* the privileged might celebrate *haute cuisine* with hazel grouse cutlets *à la Russe* or quail pies with truffles *à la Perigueux*, whereas the proletarian staples touted in the *Book of Tasty and Healthy Food* were mass-produced, inexpensive, and pragmatic. The origins of ethnic dishes were downplayed, and the general abundance would minimize the need for foraging. This, of course, undermined family traditions of mushroom-gathering and would not ease ongoing hardships. How many Soviet men and women, in exile or during wartime, remembered surviving on grass, birch bark, acorn coffee, or cabbage soup served in a boot? They certainly remembered the wild mushrooms. In *The Truce*, Primo Levi described a tricky test for mushroom safety in his long, perilous journey home to Turin, Italy after he was liberated from Auschwitz:

> None of us were sure that these were edible; on the other hand, could one leave them to rot in the woods? One could not: we were all malnourished, and, besides, the memory of hunger in Auschwitz was still too recent, and had become a violent mental stimulus, which obliged us to fill our stomachs as full as possible, and imperiously prevented us from giving up any occasion to eat. Cesare gathered a good quantity and boiled them following prescriptions and precautions unknown to me, adding to the mixture vodka and garlic bought in the village, which "kill all poisons." Then he himself ate some, but only a little, and he offered a little to many people, so as to limit the risk and have an abundance of case histories available the next day. The next day he made the rounds of the dormitories, and had never been so polite and solicitous: How are you, Sora Elvira? How's it going, Don Vincenzo? Did you sleep well? Did you have a good night? and meanwhile he looked them in the face with a clinical eye. They were all fine, the strange mushrooms could be eaten.[7]

Foraging remained necessary when unreliable rainfall in a brief growing season caused one bad harvest after another. A prolonged drought in the Volga basin in 1891–1892 caused crop failure and widespread famine. Russia's entry into World War I shifted an army of peasants from agricultural production into battle, and a shortage of food caused by the 1917 Revolution provoked counter-revolutionary threats; the civil war that followed caused a food supply crisis that led to famine. The resistance to the Bolsheviks in the summer of 1918 was the greatest peasant rebellion the country had ever experienced. The Russian peasantry was treated as a class enemy, and the drive to stop all private trade had to be modified in the face of this resistance. Maxim Gorky appealed for help, and the American Relief Administration led by Herbert Hoover set up food kitchens in thousands of villages. Yet the famine spread westward into a region depleted by four years of war. As the situation deteriorated, an American newspaper reported "Austrian Women and Babies Beg for Food." Thousands suffered from food shortages, starvation, and mushroom poisoning: "There have been thousands of cases of mushroom poisoning due to people eating the wrong varieties as meat substitutes."[8] In 1919, the government permitted some foodstuffs to be sold on the open market. Anything growing wild was initially exempt from state control but later regulated as well. Stalin's five-year plan in 1928 squeezed the peasantry further by forcing them to work on collective farms. Millions died, and an entire way of life was destroyed.

6 *Book of Tasty and Healthy Food: Iconic Cookbook of the Soviet Union*, Ministry of the Food Industry, USSR, 2012, SkyPeak Publishing.

7 Levi, Primo; *The Truce*, in *The Complete Works of Primo Levi*, 2015, Liveright, Volume I, pp. 343–344.

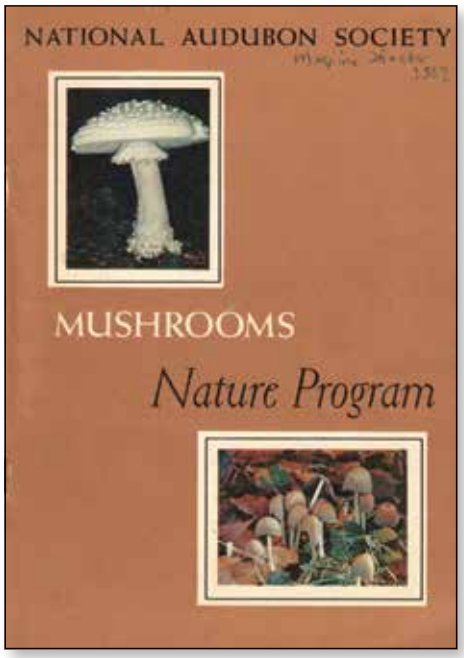
8 *El Paso Herald*, November 30, 1918.

"Is It Poisonous?" Soviet poster, 1959.

The mandate of collectivization was the turning point: in the Soviet Ukraine the unauthorized collecting of food was deemed theft, and even the possession of food was a crime, a theft from the state. This was the *Holodomor*, the Ukrainian famine of 1931–1934.[9]

With the beginning of World War II in 1939 and the subsequent Nazi attack on the Soviet Union in 1941, the bloodlands became the stage of titanic battles. Wartime exacerbated the crisis of scarcity, bringing on official rationing and private hoarding. The Nazi assault on Moscow in October 1941 initiated the greatest military battle in history. Seven million participants were mobilized for war. Life during wartime meant queues of hungry Muscovites waiting untold hours for no sugar, no meat, no bread, and no salt. Soviet trade commissars urged local enterprises to produce more food to free up the transportation system. Victory gardens multiplied in Russia as they did on the American home front, and the black market expanded exponentially. As for mushrooms, teachers and students working on collective farms prepared 20,074 tons of pickled mushrooms and 770 tons of dried mushrooms in the summer of 1942, a hungry year for everyone despite these fantastic numbers.[10] During the siege of Leningrad, Germans actually bombed the city's food supply in 1942, wiping most of it out in a single stroke, yet the Soviets suppressed knowledge of the mass starvation that resulted. The siege nearly succeeded. One desperate girl managed to scratch out on paper a "menu for after starvation," a food fantasy of ordinary fare: potato, cabbage, or mushroom soup, a main course of rice or oatmeal, possibly with mincemeat or sausage. Then she gave up and wrote, "I no longer have such dreams. I will not ever live to see this."[11]

The once and future St. Petersburg, i.e., Leningrad (1924–1991), was named in honor of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (1870–1924), the Bolshevik revolutionary and first head of the Soviet government. Born into a family of serfs, he became the ideological leader and combative voice of the Russian Revolution. His fiery oratory, impetuous and passionate, projected a state of frenzied rage against the Tsarist regime. In 1917, one of the many crises he faced was food shortages. As for mushrooms, his wife Nadezhda Krupskaya once wrote that "Ilyich used to say that he did not like mushrooms and would not pick them; but now you can't drag him out of the woods – he is in a real *rage* about mushrooms." The Russian philosopher Nikolai Valentinov reported that in the summer of 1916, Lenin and Krupskaya were hurrying to catch a train along the mountain paths leading from their holiday home near Zurich. It started drizzling, which led to a downpour. Lenin noticed mushrooms in the woods and began to pick them. They got soaked and missed the train, but a bag full of mushrooms satisfied his yen.[12] One latter-day curiosity about Lenin and fungi cropped up in 1991 in a televised hoax by a Russian performance artist, Sergei Kuryokhin. The hoax that Lenin himself was a mushroom was a product of the digital age, an absurd concoction needlessly repeated online. Kuryokhin's somehow convincing prank was, of course, patently ridiculous. One might as well claim that Elena Molokhovets was a "food writer" or that no person in Russia ever starved. On the other hand, forms of botanical tribute to Lenin do exist, e.g., a geoglyph of trees in Siberia spelling out L-E-N-I-N and Andrei Voznesensky's poem "California: The Lenin Sequoia." While Vladimir Ilyich has been mummified and meme-ified, his comrade Nikolai Bukharin wrote poems in prison with praise for chanterelles and spider webs. Bukharin was later liquidated by a spider named Stalin.[13]



Mushrooms by Roman Vishniac, National Audubon Society booklet, 1957.

Joseph Stalin (1878–1953) was the head of the Soviet Union from 1924 to his death. Many examples of his ruthlessness may be put forward; one will suffice. When Nikita Khrushchev brought Stalin news of complaints about the planned obliteration of ancient churches and cultural treasures to make way for Soviet architecture in 1931, Stalin curtly demanded: "Then you should blow them up at night."[14] In *The Faculty of Useless Knowledge* by Yury Dombrovsky, a prison camp survivor, Stalin is depicted working at a table in his garden reflecting on the weather and

9 Patenaude, Bertrand M.; *The Big Show in Bololand: The American Relief Expedition to Soviet Russia in the Famine of 1921*, 2002, Stanford; Pipes, Richard; *Russia Under the Old Regime*, 1974, Charles Scribner's Sons, pp. 16, 25.
10 Moskoff, William; *The Bread of Affliction: The Food Supply in the USSR During World War II*, 2002, Cambridge, p. 87.
11 Jones, Michael; Leningrad: *State of Siege*, 2008, Basic Books, p. 165.
12 Valentinov, Nikolai; *Encounters with Lenin*, 1968, (orig. 1953), Oxford, pp. 146–148.
13 Bukharin, Nikolai; *The Prison Poems of Nikolai Bukharin*, trans. George Shriver (2009) Seagull Books, pp. 145–146.
14 Braithwaite, Rodric; *Moscow 1941: A City and Its People at War*, 2007, Vintage, p. 22–23.

the lack of mushrooms. He questions his gardener about the lack of boletes – couldn't something be done? "No," the gardener replied, "there is nothing you can do about it. Boletes grow where they have a mind to."[15] This fictional vignette may seem implausible, but it is well-known that Stalin's daughter, Svetlana Alliluyeva (1926–2011), enjoyed mushroom gathering at the family dacha in Zubalovo, just south of Moscow. Svetlana's maternal grandparents were part of the extended family, and her grandfather Sergei Alliluyeva (Stalin's father-in-law) frequently took her on long mushroom hikes. In turn, Svetlana entertained many children of the ruling elite on these expeditions.[16] It is difficult to reconcile the culture of mycophilia with Stalin's casual brutality and mystifications in his echo-chamber of lies. Stalin: *Life has become better, comrades! Life has become more cheerful!*

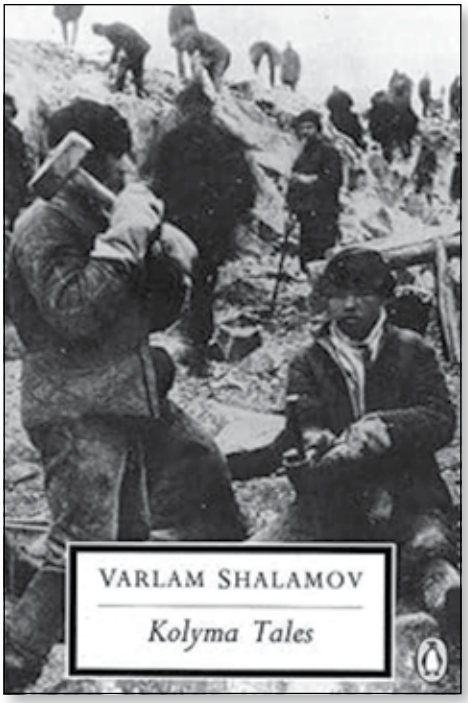
Stalin's phony exuberance was the mask of repression and political murder. His patriotic boasting resulted in this: a system of concentration camps deep in the forest zone of Siberia, consisting of 476 separate camp complexes that processed nearly 14 million people between 1934 and 1944, in which over 1.5 million people died. The masses of these inmates were incarcerated not for what they had done, but for who they were; and they were subject to starvation and pointless torture. From 1930 the Soviet regime sentenced over two million peasants to internal exile in the wilderness of Siberia. Many were wealthier peasants or *kulaks*. These were the first "specialty settlers" (i.e., prisoners) who were deported to construct villages in the remote forested taiga, the beginning of what Alexander Solzhenitsyn famously described in *The Gulag Archipelago*. All the northern camps had difficulties with food supplies and some gulags organized food-collecting detachments to forage in the wild. Besides the meager food resources, gulag camp accountants managed food substitutes and utilized wild mushrooms. Any prisoner daring an escape across the taiga knew it was possible only in summer with its prolific abundance of mushrooms, berries, herbs, and roots and the possibility of catching mice, voles, and chipmunks. Escapes were called "release by the Green Prosecutor."[17]

Knowledge of common edibles of the forest figured into many escape plans and actual escapes. Tatiana Tchernavin (1887–1971), once a curator at the Hermitage Museum, recounted her escape from the gulag with her husband Vladimir and son Andrei in *Escape from the Soviets* (1934). The family plotted their escape into Finland in August 1932 when they were sure that edible berries and "aspen fungus" (*Leccinum* sp.) would aid their survival.[18] Janusz Bardach, a Polish Jew from Odessa, was drafted into the Red Army and later sentenced to labor in the gold mines of Kolyma. He was forced to dig his own grave: "I pressed my forehead into the soft earth. With each breath I inhaled the fragrances of the forest, aromas I had learned so well as a child, when I used to hunt for wild mushrooms. These would be my last breaths, I thought." Incredibly, he managed to survive this and other horrors, recounted in his book *Man Is Wolf to Man*. He learned that chewing anything, even a bitter extraction of pine needles, gave the illusion of eating. He remembered his mother in Poland pickling the mushrooms that he gathered at dawn:

> The white mushrooms were the best, with their soft fleshy bodies. The young ones were small and sturdy … and the sprouted plate-size caps that were a foot tall and mostly unscavenged by worms. The caps varied in color from yellow-brown to deep reddish-brown or white bordering on yellow. All varieties of the boletus mushroom were edible, but there were poisonous kinds, usually the most colorful, and I was amazed that something so beautiful could be so deadly.[19]

Mushrooms aided escapees and partisans, the guerrillas of the forest. In Poland, young Poles fled into the forests soon after the war began to avoid labor conscription in Germany. This marked the beginning of the Polish underground resistance. Even with this, German soldiers collected mushrooms from Polish peasants along forest margins and railroad tracks. In some cases, whole villages would participate. Such a scene was depicted in Jerzy Kosinski's novel *The Painted Bird*: "Mushroom gathering now was a daily chore. Baskets of them were drying everywhere, basketfuls were hidden in lofts and barns. More and more grew in the woods."[20] The Jews of Lithuanian cities of Radun and Eišiškes collected mushrooms in nearby forests, an advantage to survival for partisan fighters during the German occupation. Expecting the participation of partisan bands, the USSR published and distributed *The Partisan's Companion* (1942) with instructions on how to survive and store food supplies in the wild in sub-zero temperatures.[21] This guide listed at least eleven species of edible fungi, with *Boletus edulis* most prominent but also including the "under aspen mushroom" and "under birch mushroom." The Bielski partisans who operated in what is now western Belarus are probably the best-known group, especially for their daring rescues of village Jews. The Rabinowitz family fled the Nazi ghetto into the Bialowieza Forest in Poland where they warded off starvation for two years with foods they could forage or steal. Children were taught mushroom identification and challenged to find the largest edible ones. This became a game that resulted in proudly showing off enormous mushrooms that ended up in mushroom soup.[22] Anthony Jandacek, later a member of the North American Mycological Association, wrote a story of his family using the ruse of a mushroom-gathering foray to cross the

15 Dombrovsky, Yury; *The Faculty of Useless Knowledge*, 1996, Harvill Press, p. 440.
16 Sullivan, Rosemary; *Stalin's Daughter: The Extraordinary and Tumultuous Life of Svetlana Alliluyeva*, 2015, HarperCollins p. 30, 34.
17 Applebaum, Anne; *Gulag: A History*, 2004, Anchor; Shalamov, Varlam; Kolyma Stories, 2018, trans. Donald Rayfield, New York Review Books, p. 672.
18 Tchernavin, Tatiana; *Escape from the Soviets*, 1934, Dutton, pp. 247, 260.
19 Bardach, Janusz and Kathleen Gleeson; *Man Is Wolf to Man: Surviving the Gulag*, 1998, University of California, p. 257.
20 Kosinski, Jerzy; *The Painted Bird*, 1965, Bantam, pp. 67–69, 98–103.
21 Overy, Richard; *Russia's War: A History of the Soviet War Effort*, 1941–1945, 1997, Penguin.
22 Frankel, Rebecca; *Into the Forest: A Holocaust Story of Survival, Triumph, and Love, 2021*, St. Martin's Press, p. 170.



Kolyma Tales by Varlam Shalamov, Penguin, 1994.

border and escape from Czechoslovakia in 1948. He, his mother, and two siblings spent 27 months as political refugees in West Germany until being reunited with his father in the USA. He claimed the refugee camp in Pforzheim on the edge of the Black Forest had the "most fertile source of huge boletes" he had ever encountered.[23]

For many Slavic immigrants the Catskills became a surrogate Russia. As Catskill resorts became popular in the 20th century, Russian immigrants rediscovered there the feeling for nature and the pleasures of mushroom hunting, a respite from everyday urban uproar. When Russian Jews from the Lower East Side spoke of vacationing "in the mountains," they meant the Catskills, nearby and inexpensive. At Cornell University Nabokov wrote this attraction into his novel *Pnin*: "émigré Russians who search the woods wondering about the edibility of local toadstools."[24] The Wassons' honeymoon in the Catskills was the genesis of *Mushrooms, Russia, and History* – a few wayside boletes in Valentina's hand cured her husband of mycophobia forever. The Jewish writer Michael Gold recalled his mother hiking with her children, "smelling out the mushrooms" as she had done in her native Hungary. He recalled her "poking under trees and lifting her skirt to make a bag for the mushrooms." Breathless with joy, she raved: "Ach, Gott! I'm so happy in a forest. You American children don't know what it means."[25] In Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky*, the hero arrives in Tannersville, which seemed to him like another planet: "I had never been to the mountains before… It was so full of ozone, so full of health-giving balm, it was almost overpowering." Here, in the Catskills, grandmothers from crowded tenements foraged mushrooms for their *kuchaleins*, bungalow colonies with small kitchens. Elizabeth Ehrlich remembered her grandmother Miriam, a Holocaust survivor, who rhapsodized over mushrooms she once gathered in Poland, especially *kushinushki*. This turned out to be a chanterelle. She disdained supermarket mushrooms, insisting "These are nothing compared to the little yellow mushrooms like a chicken's foot we used to get in Poland."[26]

The mycologist William Murrill put the stamp of professionalism on the Catskills as a fungal hunting ground when he established the Yama Farms Mycological Society in 1920. He installed the naturalist John Burroughs as honorary president and led walks accompanied by the crème de la crème of the American business elite. Whether Murrill actually met them is not known, but the Shoumatoff family was a respected presence in upstate New York. With the coming of the Bolsheviks, the Shoumatoffs fled their Russian estate Shideyevo to end up purchasing a dairy farm near the town of Pine Bush in the Catskills. Their odyssey is expertly told by Alex Shoumatoff in *Russian Blood: A Family Chronicle*. Two notable family members were Elizabeth Shoumatoff (1888–1980), a portrait artist famous for her unfinished portrait of President Franklin Roosevelt on the day of his death; and Andrey Avinoff (1884–1949), an artist and lepidopterist who became Director of the Carnegie Museum of Natural History in Pittsburgh.

The Shoumatoffs were avid mycophiles, and they loved the society of Yama Farms. They combed the woods with Louis Krieger's *The Mushroom Handbook* in hand, assured that their pastime "was one activity a displaced Slav could enjoy undiminished." Of his grandparents' generation Alex said, "I had known the Russians were mycophiles, but I wasn't prepared for the fact that *everyone* in the Slavic parts of the USSR is an avid and savvy mushroom buff, that *everyone* takes to the woods on Saturdays, unless he has a wedding to go to. Mushroom-picking is virtually a national pastime, and Ukrainians are no less fanatic about it than Great Russians." He related a private trip to the USSR much later to meet a Muscovite who agreed to reveal his secret mushroom patch twenty miles north of Poltava. Once in the deep forest the man produced a bottle of vodka and two cups: "we kept making toasts, to each other's families, to peace between our countries, until the vodka was gone." If their foray was then a bit unsteady, the man's ideas about mushroom edibility were also rather inebriated: "Basically, if the mushroom is good, worms eat it. If it isn't, they don't. That is the first rule my father told me. If the rabbits eat it, if the toads eat it, it is good. But if it is old, even if it is good, it is not good."[27]

The Russian photographer Roman Vishniac (1897–1990) was celebrated for his extensive photo documentation of Jewish life in Germany and eastern Europe before the Holocaust. His pictorial history of the Jews, *A Vanished World*, continues to absorb our attention because it captures the beauty of a thriving culture in its last moments before the war. What is less well-known about his photographic career was that Vishniac was also a biologist. It is not so surprising that he photographed ferns and cockroach legs, he was drawn to far more esoteric subjects: *Hemitrichia* (acellular slime molds), *Guttulinopsis* and *Dictyostelium* (cellular slime molds), and *Volvox* (green algae). Vishniac used colored polarized light to colorize images of microscopic organisms. After immigrating to the USA, one of his projects in the 1950s that dovetailed with nascent developments in amateur

23 Jandacek, Anthony; "Mushroom Trails to Freedom," *McIlvainea*, 1999, 14(1): 30–33.
24 Nabokov, Vladimir; *Pnin*, Vintage, p. 117.
25 Howe, Irving; *World of Our Fathers*, 1980, Bantam, p. 218.
26 Ehrlich, Elizabeth; *Miriam's Kitchen: A Memoir*, 1998, Penguin, pp. 300–313.
27 Shoumatoff, Alex; *Russian Blood: A Family Chronicle*, 1982, pp. 335–337.

mycology was a simple mushroom identification guide, *Mushrooms* (1957) with assistance from mycologist Donald Rogers at the New York Botanical Garden, published in association with the National Audubon Society.[28] Roman Vishniac, the Shoumatoff family, Vladimir Nabokov, Valentina Wasson – all were fortunate refugees from Soviet totalitarianism. But many of the Russian intelligentsia were prevented from emigrating to the USA to rebuild their lives. One of those Russians was Varlam Shalamov.

Varlam Tikhonovich Shalamov (1907–1982) was a Russian writer and journalist who was condemned to spend fifteen years of his life in the most godforsaken labor camp of the Soviet system of gulags – Kolyma, a frigid region of Siberia in the back of beyond. The territory of Kolyma, 260 miles north of the peninsula of Kamchatka, is the historical region of the Russian Far East that is the coldest inhabited place on planet Earth. Kolyma was prison country, and the gulag that bore its name was a site of hellish torment whose human inmates quickly lost their humanity. To describe Shalamov as a gulag survivor is a shallow way to summarize his experience. His enduring testament – the *Kolyma Stories* – are non-fiction tales from "the land of white death" drenched in the brutality of lived experience. He wrote poignantly and incisively of the contagion of criminality, of being taught to hate, of yearning to steal, of the impossibility of escape, of bestiality and despair, of human beings so frozen, exhausted, and starving that they became "skeletons upholstered in skin." Shalamov was an "Article 58 Prisoner," i.e., a political prisoner sentenced for counter-revolutionary activity. For this he was constant prey for thugs and gangsters. He described his fellow comrades of the labor camps as "depraved, mercenary, starving, and full of mutual loathing." Refusal to work was a monstrous crime. Kolyma was a vast silent forest, an endless stretch of frozen nothingness, where the easiest thing was to starve or freeze to death.

Kolyma, Kolyma
Wonderful planet.
Nine whole months of winter –
All the rest is summer.[29]

The system of food in Kolyma was chaotic, inadequate, and unreliable. On the positive side there were institutional bread and watery soup rations (usually available), parcels of food sent from home (occasional), foraged food (seasonal), and whatever else that cropped up (randomly). There was usually a better menu in a camp hospital, but not always. On the negative side there was constant hunger, fear of hunger, fights for bread, unidentified foods (called "shrapnel"), and nauseating gruel. There were many extreme foods: a cat cooked in a laboratory sterilizer, a puppy presented as mutton, canned pork in bulging cans, suspicious water from heated snow, "medical soup" (medicines, roots, and meat cubes dissolved in saline), boot grease, bread sauce (frozen breadcrumbs in water), and human flesh. A pair planning escape might invite a third person along "in case they got hungry." Occasionally there was meat from horses, bear, or ptarmigan. It was impossible to take one's eyes off someone who was eating. Everyone stared. Shalamov wrote of crazy yearning dreams of "loaves of rye bread flying over us like fireballs or angels." Alimentary dystrophy was a common hospital diagnosis – death by hunger.

Atlas of Ukrainian Mushrooms by Mariia Iakivna Zerova, 1974, front cover.

In this extremity the possibility of staving off hunger for a while by hunting for mushrooms outside the camp was a luxury available to very few, usually by sheer luck. Shalamov describes an authorized expedition in which the extraordinary profusion of colossal Kolyma fungi totally blew his mind. Bardach claimed he "never saw mushrooms as large and healthy as those in Kolyma," and he came to expect boletes the size of samovars.[30] What Shalamov encountered was an order of magnitude beyond: unbelievable landscapes of boletes like over-inflated zeppelins shining under rainwater. He describes an occasion in which all recuperating patients in a camp hospital were ordered to forage in "veritable thickets of colorful mushrooms with slippery cold caps."

In July, when the temperature by day reaches forty degrees – the thermal balance of continental Kolyma –

28 Vishniac, Roman; *Mushrooms* (1956, 2nd ed. 1966) National Audubon Society.
29 Shalamov, Varlam; *Kolyma Stories*, 2018, New York Review Books, p. 645.
30 Bardach, *op. cit*.

Atlas of Ukrainian Mushrooms by Mariia Iakivna Zerova, 1974, back cover.

> submitting to the heavy force of sudden rains, enormous slippery jacks appear in the forest clearings. These mushrooms scare people: they have slippery skins and bright spots just like snakes, red, blue, and yellow … The sudden downpours bring only a momentary relief to the taiga, the forest, the stones, the mosses, the lichens. Nature never anticipated this fertile, life-giving, beneficial rain. Rain releases all of nature's hidden strength, and the caps of the slippery jacks grow heavy and big – up to half a meter in diameter. These are frightening, monstrous fungi.[31]

The Kolyma fungi had transformed into monsters: "I entered the forest, and my fungus-collector's soul was shocked: everywhere there were enormous boletus mushrooms, growing apart from one another, higher than the grass, higher than the bog bilberry, firm, resilient, fresh, and extraordinary." He insisted on the comparison with reptiles: "The fungi seemed cold, like cold-blooded living creatures, like snakes, or anything except fungi. The fungi here didn't fit the usual classifications of naturalists: they looked as if they were creatures from some neighboring class of amphibians or snakes." He staggered through the forest in a mycological delirium "I wandered all night over the mountains, [and] I saw mushrooms, gigantic honey fungus and orange-cap boletus, visibly growing, turning into a fifteen-kilo fungus that wouldn't fit into the bucket. This was not a sign of dementia but an utterly real spectacle: mushrooms turned into Gullivers right before your eyes."[32]

What do we make of this excess? *Was it* dementia? Or nervous exhaustion? Or hallucination? For Shalamov the Kolyma boletes were an epiphany and trope of freedom; they were the alien other whose meaning endured as liberation from the systematic negation of truth that was the gulag. They represented life-giving nourishment in the face of forced starvation, a universal classifier flourishing prolifically at the metaphorical abyss between the third hunt and the unspeakable evil of political terror in a depraved social system. Like religious icons the boletes embodied forms of the natural world as they transmitted intimations of the divine world. Shalamov's mushrooms were emotional signifiers associated with suffering and internal exile. They were chess pieces hovering in the twilight of birch forests, icons of timelessness, hopeless expectation, and nostalgia for the Earth. As representatives of all natural taxa they were the transcendental brainwaves of Solaris, the mute planet that twists memory into desire, visiting life with supernatural emanations yet manifested on Earth as nothing more significant than the dirty meat of the forest. Shalamov's oneiric contradictions poeticize the strangeness of the forest and its burden of mushrooms, adding to the truth of direct observation the psychological truth of foraging as a primeval process. All mushroom lovers partake of humility or madness; they are indeed Holy Fools. This was the Kolyma psychosis.

The cultural practice of the third hunt is one of the most important historical antecedents to amateur mycology worldwide today. Some Russians have speculated with national and cultural pride that the untold abundance of forests and mushrooms across the landscape of Russia has been drawn by fate, that somehow "the dear soul of Russia" was destined for mycological glory. Since religious icons are objects of contemplation as much as objects of worship, the idea the mushrooms are icons, too, in their numinous aspect of appearance and disappearance, bears a measure of genuine spirituality. Hunting for the boletes of Russia restructured human perception of nature, provoking memories of home and family where the cataclysms of the 20th century are smothered and interred in the back of beyond. Pyotr Smirnovski's *Textbook of Russian Grammar* offers the dismal syllogism: "*An oak is a tree. A rose is a flower. A deer is an animal. A sparrow is a bird. Russia is our fatherland. Death is inevitable.*"[33] To surpass the terse finality of this unforgiving lesson we may only add that *a boletus mushroom is a fragment of paradise* – a deliverance from modernity in the image of a peasant carrying home a basket of mushrooms in the rain.

31 Shalamov, Varlam; *Sketches of the Criminal World: Further Kolyma Stories*, 2018, trans. Donald Rayfield, New York Review Books, p. 315.

32 Shalamov, ibid., pp. 331–362.

33 Quoted in Nabokov, Vladimir; *The Gift*, 1991 (orig. 1963), Vintage, p. 3.