

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Shiro Hasegawa's "Siberian Tales": A Tapestry of Diverse Human Stories

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Abstract

This article explores "Siberian Tales" by Shiro Hasegawa as a multifaceted literary work that presents a rich tapestry of human experiences set against the vast and diverse landscape of Siberia. The study examines the thematic depth of the collection, focusing on issues such as identity, survival, cultural encounters, and the complexities of human relationships. Particular attention is paid to Hasegawa's narrative techniques, including his use of descriptive imagery, symbolic elements, and character-driven storytelling, which together create a vivid and emotionally resonant portrayal of life in extreme environments. The article also highlights the interaction between local traditions and universal human values, demonstrating how the stories transcend geographical boundaries and speak to broader existential concerns. Through a literary and analytical approach, the paper argues that "Siberian Tales" not only reflects the socio-cultural realities of Siberian communities but also contributes to world literature by offering profound insights into the human condition.

KEYWORDS

Shiro Hasegawa, Siberian Tales, Siberia, human experience, identity, survival, cultural interaction, narrative techniques, symbolism, world literature.

INTRODUCTION

Commencing in April 1951, the literary journal *Kindai Bungaku* initiated the serialization of a collection of short stories that would subsequently be compiled into the anthology *Siberian Tales (Siberiya Monogatari)*. These works were published in the following chronological sequence: "The Horse's Smile" in April; "The Small Chapel" in August; "The Ball" in September; "Atavism and the Automatic Bomb" (subsequently retitled "Various People") in October; "The Medal" in December; "Anna Galykina" in January 1952; "Radoshkin" in February; and "The Dog Killer" in April. In August of that same year, these pieces were published collectively under the title *Siberian Tales* by the publisher Chikuma Shobo. In subsequent editions, supplementary short stories were incorporated, and the structural arrangement of the works was revised (Note 1). Regarding this editorial history, Noriyuki Fukushima observes

the following:

"Upon its initial publication by Chikuma Shobo in August 1952, *Siberian Tales* comprised eight stories, ranging from 'The Horse's Smile' to 'The Dog Killer.' However, upon its inclusion in *Collected Works of Shiro Hasegawa, Vol. 1*, published by Shobunsha in February 1966, three additional narratives—'Nasumbo,' 'Shilka,' and 'The Cleaner'—were appended, concurrent with a reorganization of the stories' sequence." (Note 2)

First, let us consider the significance of the arrangement of these stories. "Shilka," the last piece written among them, depicts Soviet towns and landscapes, serving as the gateway to life as a prisoner of war. The subsequent stories—"The Horse's Smile," "The Small Chapel," "The Ball," and "A Variety

of People"—are arranged in the chronological order of their publication. "The Sweeper," the first to be published, was included next because its nature—not focusing on a specific individual—closely aligns with these preceding works. However, since "The Sweeper" differs from the previous four in that it focuses solely on the experiences of the "I" (the narrator), it was likely positioned as the fifth piece for parallel contrast.

Excluding "The Medal," which was originally the fifth short story, "Anna Galkina," "Radushkin," and "Nasunbo" are again arranged by publication date, with each focusing on the character named in the title. While "The Medal" is thematic similar, it distinguishes itself from the other three by focusing on a Japanese protagonist. Finally, the collection concludes with "The Dog Killer," set in Nakhodka—the point of departure for the return to Japan. In short, the stories in the book version of *Siberian Tales* are arranged based on a combination of publication chronology and thematic progression. This structure allows the collection to be read as a unified narrative set in Siberia, even if the individual contents are not explicitly linked.

It should be noted at the outset that since Shiro Hasegawa wrote based on his own experiences, the "I" in the works is assumed to be the author himself, and the following reading is predicated on this assumption. The ultimate goal of this analysis is to clarify what the Siberian internment meant to Shiro Hasegawa.

In this chapter, I will first analyze the works through the lens of narrative personhood, followed by a discussion of life in the labor camps. Furthermore, I will examine the various characters who appear in the stories. Finally, I will provide an analysis of "The Medal," which appears to differ in structure from the other short stories.

Experiences Narrated Through Grammatical Person

First, let us examine the use of the first-person plural "bokura" (we) and the designation "heitaitachi" (the soldiers) in "Shilka." This work was added during the publication of the collected edition after the serialization of the *Siberian Tales* in *Kindai Bungaku* had concluded; thus, it is the last story written in the series (Note 3). Consequently, it exhibits slight differences in structure, person, and narrative style. Let us explore these distinctions.

The first difference lies in the descriptive focus: while other stories primarily depict events or characters, "Shilka" is largely

dedicated to the description of the town. The narrative begins with the town's name and expands to the square and the kolkhoz. Although it depicts a span of only ten days, it serves as an ideal opening for *Siberian Tales*, acting as a gateway that facilitates a smooth entry into the world of Siberia.

The second difference is the choice of pronouns. Unlike other works that utilize "watashitachi" (we/us) or "watashi" (I/me), this short story employs "bokura" and "heitaitachi." Specifically, the narrator uses "bokura" when including himself, and "heitaitachi" when adopting an external or objective perspective. This narrative characteristic—observing one's comrades objectively while narrating—is unique to "Shilka."

The soldiers carefully nibble on the black bread lunches they brought, saving the rest for later.

This scene occurs inside a transport truck. By referring to those present as "the soldiers," the narrator—who is clearly among them—effectively distances himself from the group. This distance creates an objective vantage point, intentionally bifurcating the narrator's identity into the collective "we" (bokura) and the observed "soldiers" (heitaitachi). This distinction is clearly visible in the following scene:

The driver distributes one cheap cigarette to each of the soldiers. We (bokura) inwardly compete to receive them. With this, the eternal dissatisfaction of the soldiers (heitaitachi) is temporarily appeased. (Emphasis added)

Here, the narrator observes the act of distributing cigarettes to "the soldiers," yet as a member of the group, he also receives one. By adopting the driver's perspective, he captures the act of distribution to the collective "soldiers." The anger of being kept waiting in the cold and the subsequent reward of a cigarette create conflicting emotions, which the narrator experiences as part of "us" (bokura). In this moment, the narrator shares the same feelings as the group, and the distance closes. Had the narrator not shared this experience, he likely would not have used "bokura." However, in the final sentence, he shifts back to an objective stance to observe the situation.

In the stories following "Shilka," the narrative primarily alternates between the singular "watashi"(me) and plural "watashitachi" (we). Taking "The Horse's Smile" as an example—set in Chita and depicting labor in various factories—the singular "I" is used when the narrator works alone, separated from other internees. It shifts to "we"

(*watashitachi*) only when he joins the group to return to the camp in "five-abreast columns." Thus, the text distinguishes between the consciousness of the "I" as an individual and the collective consciousness of the prisoners. While the narrator constantly navigates these roles, unlike the previous distinction, his fundamental perspective does not change whether he is acting as an individual or part of a group.

Furthermore, consider the use of "we" in "The Small Chapel." This story is narrated entirely in the first-person plural. Even where terms like "the people" or "comrades" might have been appropriate, the author deliberately chooses "we." For instance:

"Now it is my turn," we said. In fact, following an unknown order, we died one after another. (Emphasis added)

The "we" in this passage serves to unify those who are dying with the comrades who will die next, creating a sense of collective identity in the face of death. "The Small Chapel" is one of the stories that most starkly depicts the reality of internment. Consequently, the sense of a collective Japanese prisoner identity is stronger here than in other works, exacerbated by the shared struggle to survive the typhus epidemic.

Finally, "The Sweeper" is the only story centered entirely on the "I." Like "The Small Chapel," it portrays the brutal realities of internment, but focuses on the personal experience of the narrator. In "The Sweeper," the "I" is assigned two tasks. The first is clearing trash in the freezing cold. Being in the town, he frequently encounters passersby who hurl insults at him. The narrator perceives these words as follows:

These words were always accompanied by obscene, abusive interjections—like indispensable spices—which seemed to pile up around me like discarded filth, threatening to bury me. Surrounded by these voices and driven by the cold, I mined the mounds of rubbish, switching between a pickaxe, an iron bar, and a shovel.

Despite these conditions, the "I" shows no outward resistance. However, this does not imply acceptance, as evidenced by his sharp retorts to the guard's sarcasm. He does not respond to the passersby and feels a sense of relief when hiding from them while cleaning latrines (his second task). This suggests that the narrator was deeply wounded internally.

Takeda Taijun criticized *Siberian Tales* as being "sentimental" (Note 4), a quality clearly present in this story. However, this

sentimentality appears to serve as the energy that allows him to pour himself into his work. Consider the scene where he is kicked out of a house where a Ukrainian woman works:

As soon as she saw me, she said, "Get out." Her voice was cold—colder to me than the outdoor air. I looked at the bearded man. He gave me a one-eyed wink and threw the book, crumpled like scrap paper, into the *pechka* (stove). For me, the outdoors became a warmer place than the indoors.

The narrator suffers two shocks here: first, the "cold voice" of the woman, which hurts him more than the physical cold; second, the burning of the book he had found. For a man "starving for books" who had sacrificed his meager ration of "350 grams of black bread" for the chance to read, this loss is profoundly regrettable. While the narrator seems too stunned by the "cold voice" to immediately react to the book, his actions reveal a deep sentimentality.

As shown above, the work is never narrated through a single lens. The shifting of persons reveals Hasegawa's sense of fellowship. Moreover, the work is not merely about the "I"; it conveys a strong desire to tell the readers about the people the narrator encountered. While Section 3 will examine these individuals in detail, we must first consider the nature of life within the camps.

The Internment Life of "Us"

This section analyzes the nature of camp life, beginning with the inescapable issue of death. For those who become prisoners of war or survive the battlefield, the fear of and distance from death gradually diminish as they lose their comrades. In a prisoner-of-war camp, it is often impossible to provide a proper grave for a comrade. However, in *Siberian Tales*, a small chapel—though not quite a grave—is built. This reflects the prisoners' respect for their fallen comrades and a human desire to honor the dead in a foreign land.

Prisoners live under the premise that death can come at any moment—whether by disease, starvation, or senseless killing by Soviet soldiers. "The Small Chapel" first describes deaths from typhus during the period before the chapel was built:

There was a time when typhus came to our camp... We died at a rate of one person per day on average. While we dug graves, we busily crushed lice as our only line of defense. The murderous bacteria parasitized the lice, the lice parasitized the humans, and these humans were helpless. When a person died, the lice abandoned them and moved toward the living...

"Now it is my turn," we said. In fact, following an unknown order, we died one after another.

In the camps, where only the barest necessities are provided, preventing infection is nearly impossible. The prisoners must fight the disease alone; if they fail, their lives simply vanish.

Accidental death is also a common occurrence. Among the three bodies placed in the mortuary in "The Small Chapel," two died by accident: one by a heavy object falling on his head during labor, and another from mushroom poisoning. Neither expected to die that day. Regarding the third man, labeled an "escapee," the narrative offers two theories, though the camp consensus is that he was shot by a guard. Liberation from the camp comes only through death or repatriation; escape is impossible. Yet, the third man repeatedly attempted to escape, continually defying the Soviet authorities.

Thus, "The Small Chapel" speaks most frequently of death, illustrating the perceived insignificance of a single human life in that environment. Conversely, what sustains those who continue to live? The strength to endure grueling labor stems from thoughts of family and the hope of returning home. This hope is visible in small details: prisoners discussing Japanese cuisine, or comparing an old gatekeeper in "A Variety of People" to their own grandfathers in Japan. Furthermore, in "The Medal," Major Sato's theory that they will return home in three months serves as a vital source of encouragement.

However, the dream of returning home is also subject to mockery by Soviet soldiers. "The Small Chapel" contains the following passage:

(Omitted)... This latrine was a massive pit. (Omitted) Once, while we were digging this pit, an unfamiliar Soviet officer appeared and said, "You will probably go home once this pit is full." He tied a stone to a long rope, measured the depth of the hole, and laughed, telling us to dig deeper. When the pit was finished, each of us threw a shovel-full of dirt back into it, laughing and saying that this would bring our departure date one day closer.

From the prisoners' perspective, nothing was more desirable than an early return; yet, the timing of their repatriation was mockingly linked to the filling of a latrine pit. While such dehumanizing treatment was likely common, these prisoners demonstrated their resilience by transforming the situation into a moment of humor. Their ability to respond to such a joke with a joke of their own highlights a specific psychological coping mechanism.

Next is the issue of food. While the problem of food scarcity permeates the entirety of *Siberian Tales*, it is most explicitly depicted in "The Dog Killer." Consider the description of food distribution:

This distribution of food required the precision of a pharmacist. There were various measuring cups—large, medium, and small. First, the food was distributed using the largest cup, then the remainder with the medium, and finally with the small one, until at last each person received about a teaspoonful. During this process, people watched with sharp, vigilant eyes; the air was charged with bloodlust, and the previous silence had vanished. Even with such strict distribution, everyone sat like a tiger eyeing its prey, hoping to take what appeared to be the largest portion. However, once everyone had received their share, the inside of the freight car suddenly became hushed again.

Furthermore, the extent of their starvation can be inferred from the scene where they kill a dog and preserve its meat as travel rations. The act of killing the dog also clearly illustrates the collective consciousness of the group; when the responsibility for the act is questioned, it is pointed out that the blame lies not just with the individual who killed it, but with the entire group.

Perhaps the most agonizing aspect of internment life was the uncertainty of their destination. In "The Dog Killer," the prisoners, traveling for days in a sealed freight car, inwardly hope they are heading toward Nakhodka. However, their expectations are betrayed when they arrive at Komsomolsk. The scene is described as follows:

In other words, the train was not heading for Nakhodka, but for Komsomolsk. To be honest, this was nothing more than a predetermined fact that had already been told to us; we simply refused to believe it until we had absolute proof. This was because we were not the ones who had purchased the tickets; they were held collectively by an "unknown person," toward whom we were always skeptical.

Although the prisoners hoped for repatriation with every move, they were being shifted by "unknown persons." These individuals were, of course, Soviet officials—the authorities who decided the movement and eventual return of the prisoners.

While the prisoners in *Siberian Tales* undoubtedly led a harsh existence, suffering from extreme cold, starvation, and forced labor, they nevertheless maintained an interest in the events

around them and a certain zest for life. This is clearly depicted when Anna Galkina arrives at the camp. While it was rare for a civilian woman other than a laborer or a doctor to visit, the prisoners showed an extraordinary level of interest in this new person. Conversely, it is a reality of camp life that those who vanished were often quickly forgotten. However, Shiro Hasegawa never forgot them. As a testament to their existence, he chose to immortalize them within the pages of *Siberian Tales*.

Various People Encountered by the "I"

A multitude of characters appears in *Siberian Tales*. They range from named individuals to anonymous figures, from those whose inner lives are explored deeply to those depicted only superficially, and from high-ranking officials to common citizens. Furthermore, many are not native to Siberia but were sent there for various reasons, becoming laborers alongside the prisoners. Naturally, their personalities, ways of life, and ideologies differ, and their individuality is vividly expressed. Hasegawa Shiro included these characters likely because each one was an unforgettable presence to him. While many characters are based on real-life models, it can be said that Hasegawa applied his own imagination and interpretation to their portrayals.

The "I" (narrator) is proficient in Russian, which facilitates frequent conversations with Soviet citizens. In these interactions, the narrator primarily shows interest in religion, daily life, and literature. Conversely, criticisms of war and the government also surface, often voiced by the Soviet citizens themselves. These citizens can be categorized into three types:

1. The Anti-Government Type: In "The Horse's Smile," an old man stoking a fire voices criticism, stating, "No one wants war. It is the authorities (vlast) who start them," thereby holding the government responsible for the war. The story also depicts a "political dispute" between this old man, who lived through the Imperial era, and a young Red Army soldier raised on Soviet ideology. This conflict highlights a generational divide in values.

2. The Indifferent Type: Pasha in "A Variety of People" represents this type. Rather than criticizing the government, he is a youth who lacks interest in politics altogether, focusing instead on religion. Similarly, the gatekeeper Bolshnikov in the same story is a devout believer who views everything as God's will, yet criticizes humanity by claiming wars occur because

"men fear one another."

3. The Pro-Government and Communist Type: This type is predominantly found among young Red Army soldiers and political officers. For instance, Second Lieutenant Berzovsky in "The Ball" praises the government and finds joy in living under socialism while criticizing capitalism. His patriotism stems from being raised by the state as an orphan. Berzovsky claims that the Russian language is "the most abundant of all," placing it above all other tongues. While the narrator does not openly object, he internally holds his own mother tongue (Japanese) in the same high regard. Here, we see a collision of two different worldviews, though both share a deep respect for their respective native languages.

Beyond political differences, Hasegawa depicts various human temperaments. Some are kind and seek to help the prisoners, while others view them through the lens of prejudice. An example of the former is Maria Zolotukhina, the "meticulous old woman" in "Shilka" who manages a vegetable team at a kolkhoz. She feeds the "soldiers" boiled potatoes because her own husband was a soldier who died in an accident while returning home from the front. Her kindness is most apparent when, after being tripped by a child's prank and laughed at, she immediately smiles and waves to the departing truck, momentarily forgetting her embarrassment to offer a sincere farewell. This suggests a shared sense of sympathy among Soviet citizens who lost family to the war.

The title "The Horse's Smile" is derived from a Tatar man of unknown real name, nicknamed "Musulmon" by the others, who refers to himself as "the smile (ulybka) of a horse (konskaya)." Though he is not the sole focus, this bright youth is characterized by his skill with horses, his beautiful singing voice, and his habit of picking up discarded cigarettes only to give them away if asked. For an internee, tobacco was a precious commodity rarely obtained without a trade. Despite working alongside the prisoners with a mature demeanor, his smile remains boyish. Although his time with the narrator was brief, the use of his name in the title suggests he was an "unforgettable person" to the "I."

Tonya and Tanya in "A Variety of People" initially appear harsh. They strictly distinguish their status from that of the prisoners and speak rudely, "working [us] to the bone" to increase their own wages. Naturally, the prisoners felt a sense of resentment. However, the narrative also reveals their personal struggles: young Tonya's husband is in a penal battalion, leading her to seek companionship with other

soldiers out of loneliness; young Tanya is overwhelmed with the care of a newborn. Despite the prisoners' dislike of being used by them, they felt a sense of loneliness when the women were absent, suggesting a bond formed through the routine of shared labor.

Other figures, like Radushkin, show genuine concern for the prisoners. While he occasionally lectured them, he is portrayed as someone who was always on their side.

Among these diverse personalities, Nasunbo and Anna Galkina stand out for their strong individuality. Nasunbo, a Mongol, harbored a "primitive sense of rivalry toward the Japanese." This was partly because he was often mistaken for being Japanese, and partly due to the loneliness of being a lone Mongol in a Japanese camp. His physical strength made him a difficult partner for the Japanese prisoners to keep up with, creating a distance between them. A nomad who became a prisoner through a mistake, Nasunbo lived freely even within the camp and eventually attempted to escape. Despite his subsequent transfer for interrogation, the narrator remembers him as "a good man," embodying a spirit of freedom within *Siberian Tales*.

Anna Galkina, who appears as a Japanese interpreter, seemed wretched to the prisoners. Having been married to a Japanese man, she spoke a "broken Japanese" that the prisoners struggled to understand. Her interpreting was often half-hearted and unfair, not out of malice, but out of a lack of motivation. She treated all prisoners equally, showing no signs of ethnic discrimination. However, she remained profoundly indifferent and solitary. Her refusal to speak about herself led to the spread of rumors among the prisoners, effectively turning her life into a legend.

Hasegawa depicts these figures with humor and irony, yet without a critical or judgmental eye; he accepts them as they are. The characters interact with the prisoners sometimes as "Japanese POWs" and at other times as fellow human beings, transcending nationality. This variety illustrates that "it takes all kinds to make a world." Toshio Motomura notes:

One could list such examples indefinitely: the old coal miner Pavlov ("The Small Chapel"), the brick factory watchman Radushkin ("Radushkin"), the blacksmith Pasha ("A Variety of People"), and the female trackmen Tanya and Tonya (*ibid.*). All of these are portraits of the "grassroots" people Hasegawa Shiro discovered in Siberia. (Note 5)

Indeed, while some characters are camp officials, the majority

are common laborers. Living in conditions scarcely better than the prisoners, these Soviet workers accepted their lot and lived through their labor without resisting fate. The works suggest that under the socialist system, even the citizens lacked complete freedom; yet, each lived according to their own thoughts. For Hasegawa, a "human being" is one who strives to survive in any circumstance. By depicting such "living" humans, his narrative voice remains a quiet observation rather than a loud accusation or critique.

The Character Portrait of Major Sato

Before analyzing "The Medal," it is instructive to consider Shiro Hasegawa's own remarks regarding this work:

"There really was a battalion commander like Major Sato. As Soviet propaganda progressed, his true nature became harder to discern. Yet, he continued to act as if he were still the commander of old... Among the stories in *Siberian Tales*, I personally consider 'The Medal' to be the best. Because no one takes it seriously, or because it is labeled a poor work, I have come to believe all the more that it is a masterpiece." (Note 6)

In this section, I will analyze "The Medal," a work Hasegawa himself regarded as a masterpiece.

Major Sato dedicated thirty years of his life to the military before becoming a Soviet prisoner. However, he "seemed not to clearly recognize that he was a captive." Even in internment, he attempted to maintain his pre-war lifestyle and his persona as a battalion commander. In other words, he sought to live under the best possible conditions within the camp, and fortunately, his particular camp "preserved the structure of the old army." Nevertheless, he lived in fear of losing his status in the eyes of his fellow prisoners, sensing the impossibility of indefinitely commanding respect as a Major of the Japanese Army while being a captive himself.

Having risen through the ranks from an enlisted soldier to a Major, Sato was unable to abandon the status he had worked so hard to achieve. He can be viewed as a figure who strategically manipulated circumstances to sustain his identity as a Major. He endeavored to survive in Siberia by refusing to change his old way of life, an effort that initially yielded results—such as maintaining separate quarters for officers and soldiers. He justified this by claiming that living together would "injure the dignity of the officers," though his true motive was likely to preserve his own authority. The Soviet authorities permitted this arrangement to utilize the Major's former

authority as a tool for maintaining order among prisoners unaccustomed to camp life. Thus, Major Sato's presence was also convenient for the Soviets.

In the initial camp, the Major was exempt from labor. Meanwhile, he utilized prisoners—his own countrymen exhausted by toil—as orderlies for his room, deriving self-esteem from their salutes. He invoked the Emperor when necessary, insisting, "We are in Siberia by the order of His Majesty the Emperor," rather than as prisoners. To maintain respect, he propagated the groundless theory that they would return to Japan in three months—a claim he seemingly believed himself. When this theory lost its efficacy, he raised the "issue of wage improvement," attempting to negotiate food rations with authorities despite lacking actual power. For starving soldiers, even false hope was preferable to none. Beneath Sato's pursuit of respect lay a desperate struggle to maintain his former station and a preoccupation with holding onto power.

Sato's profound pride was repeatedly wounded by the political officer, Borokov. During the ceremony where his shoulder straps were stripped, the Major—who once blustered as a commander—hung his head. As the prisoners' lives became organized and their identity as captives solidified, the Soviet side no longer required Sato's leadership. They waited for an opportunity to corner him, eventually stripping him of his rank in front of everyone. This can be viewed as a form of "camp education," demonstrating that everyone was subject to the same rules and that commanders were no different from common soldiers.

The conflict between Major Sato and Borokov is a recurring theme. Borokov clearly despised Sato, likely seeing him not as a distinguished soldier, but as someone who attained rank merely through longevity. Borokov sought to force Sato to realize that he was just another prisoner, leading to frequent clashes. Borokov asserted his authority through actions, notably during May Day, leading the soldiers to realize whose orders actually carried weight. As the realization dawned that the Major was a powerless captive, the habit of standing at "attention" vanished—first among the carpenters in the joinery factory:

The Battalion Commander would occasionally inspect the premises and enter this joinery factory. Previously, a command of "Attention!" would ring out, and the soldiers would snap to. Now, however, those customs had vanished among these craftsmen. They merely glanced at him and

continued their work in silence. Significantly, the Commander himself did not find this strange.

In contrast, when Borokov appeared, everyone immediately stood at "attention." The respect once afforded to Sato had shifted to Borokov. Furthermore, Borokov restricted Sato's freedom, halting his speeches to the men and terminating the "special rations" that had allowed Sato to live comfortably. While Borokov initially utilized Sato to manage the "old army structure," he maintained his own relationship with the soldiers, reflecting his distrust of the Major. The soldiers, too, harbored resentment:

"We return from labor only to be put on guard duty at headquarters; it is truly absurd, truly absurd."

Though Sato intercepted this soldier's letter, the sentiment likely reached the political officers. This explains why Borokov eventually discovered the location of the "seventh trunk," a secret supposedly known only to Sato and his orderly.

Ultimately, Sato was demoted from commander to prisoner. His attempt to mold the environment to his will failed. He was sent to a "democratized" punishment battalion where he was forced into labor like everyone else. His pride was further shattered as he was yelled at and addressed rudely by former subordinates. For Sato, life in the democratized battalion was the most agonizing experience of all. Even there, however, his survival instinct took over. References to the "Emperor" vanished from his speech; he sought isolation to avoid suffering and joined "democracy" lectures out of fear of being "denounced" (*tsurushiage*). His actions were purely performative—a "play" to fit the situation. This is most evident during his forced self-criticism:

"I was once the Emperor of Siberia, sitting cross-legged atop the soldiers and sucking the sweet nectar from the working masses. Now, I have awakened to class consciousness... I have cherished the medal I received from Hirohito, but today, I wish to trample it underfoot to vent my long-standing resentment."

His claims of "awakened class consciousness" were a lie; he merely mimicked the language of democracy to avoid persecution without understanding it. His self-criticism was a performance; he surreptitiously hid the "trampled" medal back in his rucksack. He could never truly discard his beloved decoration. Sato returned to Japan not as a reformed man, but as a degraded one who continued his "act" to the very end, limping as he boarded the ship.

"The Medal" differs structurally from other stories in *Siberian Tales*. While all characters have "individuality," Sato's individuality lies in his situational adaptability—a trait that distinguishes him from the Soviet workers or other prisoners. Unlike Nasunbo, who was a free spirit who only realized his predicament upon meeting fellow Mongols, Sato refused to accept his status as a prisoner from the start. His inability to judge his situation accurately and his obsession with military rank set him apart.

Thus, while other stories focus on Soviet figures and the prisoners' observations of Siberian life, "The Medal" depicts the ruin of a "human" who fails to adapt to a new environment. Sato is likely a composite figure representing many such individuals. The story also illustrates the "democratization" of the battalion—a process driven by both Soviet influence and the prisoners' own exhaustion and resentment toward the old hierarchy.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the work, the narrator "I"—or Shiro Hasegawa—actively interrogates the "unknown world" of the Soviet Union through its citizens, soldiers, and laborers. He observes the lives of common Siberian people and subtly notes their struggles. The theme of the work is not merely the hardship of internment, but the communication of the ideologies and lifestyles of various individuals—including the narrator—sharing the same space. This necessitated an objective, "cool-headed" narrative style. This objectivity led to shifting perspectives and a distinction between the "individual" and the "collective." The large cast of characters marks a significant departure from Yoshio Ishihara's *Bōkyō to Umi*. Another difference is that the prisoners are consistently depicted as a "group" (*shudan*) without a pervasive critical consciousness.

Furthermore, the detailed descriptions of the towns, their nature, and daily events—interspersed with humor and irony—enhance the appeal of *Siberian Tales*. Regarding the criticisms the work received, Hasegawa noted:

"Shortly after returning from Siberia, I met someone who asked if internment was like 'Notes from a Dead House.' I found this incomprehensible and remained silent. Later, Hiroyuki Itsuki remarked that 'Siberian Tales' was a 'carefree' book that didn't show the suffering of prisoner life. If that is so, perhaps it is because I served my time in Siberia gladly, as one who was guilty." (Note 7)

Hasegawa went to Siberia "gladly" because he wanted to witness "Revolutionary Russia" and was interested in the socialist system. This intellectual curiosity explains the presence of political and religious discourse in the text. While the most extreme horrors are not the primary focus, the work follows the entire trajectory of the Siberian internment. Through the events, conversations, and actions of the prisoners, it becomes clear that their lives were far from easy.

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