

*A model of superior investigative journalism*

## Frank Westerman Engineers of the Soul

**E**NGINEERS OF THE SOUL is the riveting story of how authors were forced to write in service of an ideology, in this case communism as it was practiced in the Soviet Union. Westerman's sharp pen combines a fine example of investigative journalism with a dash of literary history. In the book's ingenious construction he continually contrasts the Soviet past with present-day Russia, leading the reader into a maze of mirrors through Absurdistan.

It was in 1932 that Stalin first used the expression 'engineers of the soul' to refer to Soviet writers. It would become a well-known phrase and a feared concept. Together with the actual engineers, these engineers of the soul were supposed to contribute to the definitive establishment of the Communist paradise: by changing the appearance of the country with ambitious waterworks – Moscow Seaport! – and by playing upon the souls of its inhabitants in books in such a way that the New Man would rise up, respectively.

The writers (the *liriki*) were also given the special task of lavishing praise on the builders (the *fiziki*): this became a literary-propagandistic genre in its own right, to which Westerman, himself once a student of hydraulic engineering, devotes much of his attention. For this book he undertook two spectacular journeys: the first was to the Gulf of Kara Bogaz, now a muddy bay in the Caspian Sea, but once described by Konstantin Paustovski as a marvel of hydraulic engineering, and the second led through the books – and the lives – of other Soviet writers, like Maxim Gorki, Andrej Platonov, Boris Pilnjak and Isaak Babel.

Paustovski is well-chosen as the main character of this drama in many acts: in the Soviet period he was an intriguing figure, who became a virtual legend with his six-volume autobiography *Story of My Life*, but in those volumes you will find practically nothing of what Westerman came to learn about his life in the course of his travels. The fact that for this reason *Engineers of the Soul* also has acquired literary newsworthiness is an additional merit of an outstanding book, which has given writers their history back – at the very place where their freedom of expression was taken away from them.



*Endlessly fascinating, breathtaking. Engineers of the Soul is surprising and original, not to mention meticulously researched and well-written.*

DE VOLKSKRANT

*Engineers of the Soul is a beautifully written, well-documented, extraordinarily fascinating book, full of wonderful anecdotes.*

VRIJ NEDERLAND

*Engineers of the Soul is a gripping and witty book...in many respects a model of superior investigative journalism.*

DE GROENE AMSTERDAMMER

*Engineers of the Soul makes clear that we should not be so quick to pass judgment on the writers who sang the praises of the Russian state.*

HET FINANCIËLE DAGBLAD

Frank Westerman has lived and worked as a writer and journalist in Moscow for the last five years. His last book, *De graanrepubliek* (The Republic of Grain) was nominated for the General Bank Literature Prize and the Golden Owl and received the Dr. Lou de Jong Prize for contemporary history.



Foundation for  
the Production and  
Translation of  
Dutch Literature  
Singel 464  
NL - 1017 AW Amsterdam  
TEL. 31 20 620 62 61  
FAX +31 20 620 71 79  
E-MAIL office@nlpvf.nl  
WEBSITE www.nlpvf.nl

#### PUBLISHING DETAILS

*Ingenieurs van de ziel* (2002)  
288 pp, 10,000 copies sold  
With references

#### RIGHTS SOLD

England (Harvill), Germany (Ch. Links Verlag) and France (Christian Bourgois)

#### RIGHTS

Atlas  
Postbus 13  
NL - 1000 AA Amsterdam  
TEL. +31 20 524 98 00  
FAX +31 20 627 68 51  
E-MAIL atlas@vug.nl  
WEBSITE www.boekenwereld.com

Sample translation from

*Engineers of the Soul* by Frank Westerman  
(Amsterdam: Atlas, 2002)

**Translated by Arno Pomerans**

The illusion

The Moscow film archive is a small but choice slice of the Soviet Union. Its glass front suggests transparency, though there is nothing to see except a tiled hall and a few pillars here and there. The place might just as well have been a rehabilitation centre or a goods depot, but a reassuring small sign near the entrance left no doubt about its function: GOSFILMOFOND, the State Film Foundation.

The day I walked in, the uniformed guard ushered me straight through the narrow metal-detector gate.

*Dokumenti*, he barked, and after a doubtful look at my papers: ‘What have you come for?’

I wanted to say, for Kara Bogaz, the movie, but that would have sounded unduly theatrical.

‘I have an appointment with Igor Vasiliev, the conservator.’ During the idle moments I was kept waiting on the tiled floor, I mused about the contrast between the two sides of the glass wall. Outside, fashionable Moscow kept rushing by. The film archive was half a block from Tverskaya, the famous shopping street, called Gorki Street until the late eighties. The moment the Soviet bell jar was

lifted in 1991, night life began to flourish along this eight-lane arterial road. Former state distribution centres of milk, vodka and liver sausage were transformed into nightclubs and casinos, with flocks of nightbirds fluttering on the pavement under the light of Lancôme and L'Oréal advertisements. In the daytime, the most striking features were the countless jewellers' shops, and the bureaux d'échange with their armoured tills.

Behind the windows of the archive, by contrast, little if anything had changed.. It was not by chance that Igor Vasiliev was called a conservator. Suddenly he stood before of me – a gaunt figure in a dustcoat. He apologized for not being able to shake hands, he had been lugging dusty cans about. 'Everything is ready. Please follow me.'

We walked away from the sunlight, down a corridor, up a flight of stairs. Over a rubber curtain, it said 'Cinema 1'. If the small red light was on in the corridor, then a movie was being shown inside. The film theatre was of modest dimensions, four rows of folding chairs, twenty seats all in all.

'Quite right,' said the conservator in reply to my question if this was where the Soviet censors used to examine films.

Igor Vasiliev filled in a receipt and handed it to me. I must have looked shocked as I stared at the piece of paper, because he said: 'Your colleagues from the television think it's a snip.' For a single performance of *The Black Mouth* ('an artistic sound film based on a script by Comrade K. Paustovski), I had to shell out 130 dollars. I had obviously been wrong. The new times had advanced to the innermost recesses of the archive.

Because I did not feel like bargaining and also because I had never before hired an entire cinema for myself, I paid up with feigned indifference. Then Igor Vasiliev dimmed the lights and set his projector purring.

On the screen, quivering letters performed a nervous dance: 'Yalta Film Production Workshop presents...', followed after a few seconds by 'Kara Bogaz – The Black Mouth.' The titles started to roll fitfully to the strains of a solemn

piece of music, and revealed a striking number of non-Russian names.

Mekhmedev as Ali-Bek, the medicine man; Bekarova as the widow Nachar.

‘This is the film debut of the Turkmen people,’ whispered Igor Vasiliev. ‘As far as we can tell these are the earliest shots of Turkmen actors.’

Even before I could ask in what year *Kara Bogaz* was filmed, the figure ‘1935’ loomed up on the screen.

I was curious about the bay of Kara Bogaz and its salt works in the thirties. What could they have looked like? The film was shot on location, and after about five minutes Kara Bogaz Seaport – seen from the Caspian – passed before my eyes. Small stone sheds on a metalled quay. Deserted jetties. A windmill for generating electricity. Low barracks between piles of sand. The eye of the camera came to rest on a platform with two wooden barrels of fresh water. They used to be filled with spring water from the Caucasus. But just as in 1931, when Paustovski waited in vain for transport in Krasnovodsk, the tankers Frunze and Dzhherzhinski failed to put to sea on time. The water supply ran out, and tension rose high between the red engineers and the Turkmen contract labourers. High violin notes rendered the desert heat palpable, while the drums struck with ferocious violence foreshadowed the impending clashes between the Bolsheviks and the nomads. The latter had put up their *kibitkas* at the edge of the settlement and were cutting the caked sulphate into blocks before carting it off on their camels in exchange for sweet water.

As the heavily laden ‘salt caravan’ shambled out of the picture at a provocatively slow pace, the bay of Kara Bogaz loomed up in the background. The view was blinding; the screen lit up the whole little theatre. There was no escaping it, but my elbows dug more deeply into the arms of my chair. Thin contours rose up in the white glow. The bay of Kara Bogaz was a reflecting pool with a ribbed collar, not of surf (there was none) but of solidified Glauber salt. On the beach, ridges of crystal lay sparkling in the sun.

*Kara Bogaz* was a movie halfway between a straight report and a dramatized reconstruction. By the canon of socialist realism, Soviet artists were only allowed

to deviate from the facts when extrapolating the dynamics of the present into the future, thus conveying the glorious promise of things to come. I wondered whether this particular ‘artistic sound film’ kept pace with (or ran ahead of) the actual events. Did it give some indication about the real future of the bay? Or was I simply looking at a piece of propaganda based on sheer invention?

Paustovski’s screenplay focuses on the struggle for drinking water. The hero of his film is the red director of a chemical complex, an uncompromising war veteran with a strongly developed sense of justice. This man, Miller by name, is faced with a host of unexpected setbacks, which he overcomes with sensible decisions (or, if there was no alternative, with great courage).

To solve the water shortage, and at the same time to win the Turkmen labourers over to the socialist cause, Miller orders his engineers to build a machine for desalinating sea water by means of solar energy. Although the technology is not yet up to this task, the rational powers of the Bolsheviks are plainly more than a match for Turkmen superstitions. In Paustovski’s words, ‘Soviet man will catch the sun in a mirror, much as the kubitka dweller catches a fox in a sack.’ Needless to say, the nomads do not for one moment believe that the newcomers from the north can turn Caspian brine into drinking water. The Soviet challenge boils down to a kind of superiority test, and, considering the earlier encroachments by the Tsarist armies, is a highly civilised way of spreading the Bolshevik message as far as Persia.

‘And who is making you a gift of this sweet-water machine?’ Miller asks this nation of camel drivers like a schoolmaster. ‘We, the Bolsheviks. You and your grandchildren will remember us with everlasting gratitude.’

The Turkmen nomads must be made to realise that Stalin, ‘the new desert prince in Moscow’, is not out to enslave them. Far from it, the Soviet ruler has been calling for ‘friendship between all the people.’

But how did this friendship work in practice?

Amansoltan Saporova, the lecturer in the history of chemistry I had met in Moscow, helped me to find the answer to that question. In a letter from

Ashkhabad, she drew my attention to the original material Paustovski had used: two volumes of *The Turkmen Spark*. As additional material for her thesis on the history of the Turkmen sulphate industry, this yellowed and crumbling weekly also proved a treasure trove of information enabling me to judge the veracity of Paustovski's book and screenplay. A striking number of details seemed to be correct. Although Paustovski never saw the bay, he had set to work like a conscientious explorer and not as a writer of fiction. He took his dialogues and concrete incidents from real life, or at least from the life of the pioneers as reported in *The Turkmen Spark*.

Miller, the hero of the film, was modelled on Jakov Rubinshtayn, the director of Kara Bogaz Chemitrust. Rubinshtayn was a Polish communist and a war veteran possessed of enormous energy. Like Paustovski he had roamed the Ukraine and the rest of Central Europe during the First World War and the revolution. Their paths had crossed more than once (both had stayed in Kiev and Odessa at the same time), but they had never actually met. Paustovski presented Rubinshtayn as a socialist manager of the no-nonsense sort. His subordinates called him 'indefatigable' which, in the light of his disciplinarian attitude and demanding nature, was not meant to be flattering. Ever since Lenin's 'war communism', the ever-active Rubinshtayn had been a pioneer of Soviet economic policy, and it was thanks to his dynamic approach that he had been chosen for the Kara Bogaz mission.

'If Rubinshtayn can't get things off the ground in the Turkmen desert,' they said in Moscow, 'then nobody can.'

Paustovski tried to picture Rubinshtayn's life in the remote bay as best he could. In the *Turkmen Spark* he had read about the countless obstacles in Rubinshtayn's way: opium addiction, superstition, backwardness., the glaring inequality between the sexes. To reduce that, the women's section of the regional Party committee had banned the wearing of the *pirandzha*, the blackest and most concealing of the veils. Had not Lenin's wife asked the first Moslem (Uzbek) girl

onto the platform at a Komsomol congress as early as in 1919, and demonstratively removed her veil with a flagstaff?

Against the background of ‘the public burning of veils’, which the Soviets organised in Central Asian oasis towns, Paustovski introduces the ‘widow Nachar’, an outcast at whom the nomad children were wont to fling cow dung. Stout-hearted Russian women took pity on her and sent her – in ‘European dress’ – to Baku as a textile worker.

Needless to say, Soviet morality imposed from on high provoked the resistance of the *tabibs*, the medicine men watching over the old traditions. In his *The Bay of Kara Bogaz*, Paustovski presents them as ‘practitioners of Barbaric methods,’ wont to bleed their patients, often with fatal results, and treating burns with ‘urine-soaked compresses’. Their nefarious role is not confined to maiming their kinsmen; no, the *tabibs* also incite the salt workers against their Russian foremen.

Systematic sulphate extraction is threatened by their conspiratorial tactics. The Soviet engineers have devised a method for crystallising salt water in the bay in petrol basins, thus speeding the sulphate-extraction process. However, at Lake No. 6 the Turkmen labourers revolt: they refuse to cut an access channel in the marl. The supervisors are taken by surprise at first, but then realise that the *tabibs* are behind it all. They have told their people that Allah would cover the earth with a black crust if even a single pick is brought down on the marl..

In the film, the desalination machine is smashed when rumour has it that it is possessed of satanic powers.

Such acts of destruction and sabotage were regular occurrences according to the *Turkmen Spark*. But just like Miller in the film, who finally gained Turkmen respect by winning a horse race, so Rubinshtayn, too, did not allow such bouts of destruction to wear him down. His charisma enables him to recruit and inspire a large work force. By the summer of 1931, his Chemitrust employed 4,900 contract labourers (mainly Turkmen and Kazakhs). That was a considerable feat, seeing that their banning of veils and their collectivisation of farms, had earned

the Soviets deep hatred in a short time. *Kibitka* dwellers who refused to bow to the red authorities, which meant loss of cattle and freedom, folded their tents and escaped in long caravans to Persia and Afghanistan. It was an open secret that the Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic was getting depopulated except for the coastal stretch and the oases.

Men like Rubinshtayn were able to stem the exodus to some extent. It was a great help to him of course that he could call on hundreds of volunteers from the Komsomol movement, young idealists who flocked in from all corners of the Soviet Union. They introduced mutual competition among the salt diggers, with bonus points for exceeding the production norms, and the ‘Order of the Camel’ for the most sluggish brigades. As a result, sulphate extraction exceeded all expectations during the pioneering years. Rubinshtayn managed to reach the production quota set for the First Five-Year Plan (1928-1933) in four years, an achievement for which Chemitrust Kara Bogaz was distinguished with the ‘Red Banner’. During the celebrations on 17 October 1932, reported at length in the local papers, Comrade Rubinshtayn was the man of the hour.

‘Today the shores of Kara Bogaz are no longer the home of nomadic superstitions,’ he said at the end of his address. ‘We have transformed the desert into a socialist enterprise that can measure up to the other great Soviet construction projects.’

I first read about the personal life of this red company director in a footnote to Amansoltan Saparova’s thesis:

‘Jacov G. Rubenhtayn (1895 -1938). Arrested in May 1937. Sentenced to “death by execution” in October 1938 under Article 58 (“counterrevolutionary activities”) by the Military Supreme Court in Moscow

Rehabilitated posthumously in 1956 “because of lack of evidence and falsification of the case records”.’

What had gone wrong? I realised that Rubinshtayn must have been one of the countless victims of Stalin’s purges in 1937-1939. But how could a Soviet

manager possibly have fallen from grace and yet appear as the hero of a socialist-realist film?

I wrote a card to Amansolta in Ashkhabad asking her to tell me what she knew about this unfortunate Pole. She replied that she had merely been shown the ‘rehabilitation proof’, but that Rubinshtayn’s personal file was still in existence. Perhaps it had meanwhile been released for public scrutiny.

Not to foreigners, anyway, it appeared. But when I asked a Russian linguist from Moscow State University to enquire, she had no difficulty in getting permission to examine file no. 140527 in the Archive for Socio-Political History.

The first of the twelve documents covering the Rubinshtayn case was a questionnaire the director of the Chemitrust completed in September 1933.

Nationality: *Jewish*

Descent (rank or class): *bourgeois parents*

Party membership since: *1917*

Membership number: *0616978*

Party functions: *Member of the Central Committee of the Turkmen Socialist Republic; President of Kara Bogaz Regional Committee*

Foreign languages: *Polish, German (English with the help of a dictionary)*

Revolutionary activities before 1917: *membership of ‘lewica’, the illegal Socialist Party of Poland, 1910-1914*

Repressive measures suffered before 1914: *solitary confinement in Warsaw, Prague, Lublin, Sedlets, Ostrog, Wolynsk and Odessa*

A separate certificate complete with stamps and initials appeared to be a ‘psychological sketch’ of Jacov Rubinshtayn. The compilers mentioned two positive points and one negative point in his character make-up:

Comrade Rubinshtayn is distinguished by his outstanding discipline and exceptional energy. He is totally loyal, which makes him particularly suited to the role of executive leader. As against these positive qualities, his political

consciousness (his knowledge of Marxism-Leninism) leaves much to be desired. Because of this weakness he ought to serve under a general director.

Before 1934, no incriminating documents were placed into the file. But that did not mean that Rubinshtajn had an easy time in his headquarters in the bay of Kara Bogaz. Since the records were begun in 1932, the production curves had kept dipping, and though that was not the director's fault, Moscow kept clamouring for high quality sodium sulphate. No excuses were accepted.

The fact that his rough living conditions still earned him compassion at first, may be gathered from reports to a salt congress in Leningrad, from which Amansoltan has quoted at some length. An agronomist who had conducted tests for the Academy of the Sciences about the chances of growing vegetables and grapes in the area, had painted a sombre picture for the Academy in 1933. 'Even the slightest breeze whips up clouds of dust and covers the entire settlement with it. The powdered salt penetrates the barracks and damages all machinery. The absence of trees – which proved impossible to grow – has a depressing effect on the colonists. For lack of greens and herbs all sorts of diseases – such as scurvy – are rife among the Russians (not among the Turkmens and Kazakhs). Add the shortage of drinking water, which has to be shipped in from Baku, and you have some idea of the tortures our pioneers have to undergo.'

At about the same time, the chief people's commissar of Turkmenistan, Comrade Atabaiev, delivered an impassioned address in an icy-cold city of Leningrad wreathed in polar night, in which he announced the construction of eleven chemical works. 'Once upon a time, naturalists used to think that the bay of Kara Bogaz was a deathly pit, but I can tell you: it is a living model of Mendeleev's table.'

One in three of the elements listed in the periodic system of the Russian chemist Dmitri Mendeleev, in Russia better known as the state vodka inspector, was found in commercial quantities in the Kara Bogaz salt lake: sulphur, phosphorus, chlorine, and bromine, but also such metals as magnesium and

tungsten, and the radioactive elements strontium and radium. The Turkmen people's commissar envisioned a girdle of chemical industries in Kara Bogaz , from which not only the cotton plantations of Central Asia would greatly benefit (thanks to artificial fertilisers and defoliant), but also the defence requirements of the entire Soviet Union.

The only pity was that the exploitation rate had begun to decline. In 1933, the first processing factory had still not yet been finished. Jacov Rubinshtayn was short of everything he needed: cement, fuel, tools, food – but worst of all was the lack of drinking water.

In the film, the thirst of the desert proletariat assumes Biblical proportions. In one of the salt extraction sites, a Russian inspector sinks to his knees from the effects of dehydration. He loses consciousness. When it then appears that the water reserves are down to a few drops, a fight breaks out between the Turkmens. There is a lot of pulling, and pushing and screaming; woman drag one another away from the small tap by their plaits, and batter one another viciously with wooden mugs. A baby wrapped in rags gets squashed in a woman's armpit.

The scene is true to life, and it occurred to me that the actors must have been on a waterless diet of nothing but dry ship's biscuits, to make their fight for water look as brutal as possible.

Water, sweet water, was in fact at a premium. As a sign of his determination, Jacov Rubinshtayn had had a fountain built in Lenin Square of Kara Bogaz Seaport. Alas it spouted brine, so that the droplets landing on people's hands and face turned into white spots in no time at all.

It seemed impossible to live in a small chemical centre where the temperature in summer could easily rise above fifty degrees Celsius. Yet people did live there. If you counted the tent dwellers on the extraction sites, and also the outpost on Lake No. 6, then you would find that 17,000 souls camped in the bay of Kara Bogaz in 1933. Though all workers were entitled to four square metres of living space each, they had to make do with just two. There were no latrines or sewers, and hygiene was non-existent. There was a shortage of schools, canteens, crèches

and storage space. Since Rubinshtayn thought it pointless to stand by with folded arms while scanning the horizon for a supply of fresh water from Baku, he ordered the mixing of concrete with seawater. That was the only way to continue the construction work, though it did the quality of the walls not much good. When the director inspected the building site, it did not escape him how brittle and crumbling the buildings made of ‘salt concrete’ turned out to be.

Later in Rubinshtayn’s file this was called ‘complicity in Trotskyite sabotage’ – but that came later.

Over the years Moscow grew more and more disturbed by Rubinshtayn’s progress reports, the balance between success and failure having begun to tilt in the wrong direction. Rubinshtayn’s excuses rang increasingly hollow in his superiors’ ears. He kept referring to ‘the fall in the level of the Caspian Sea’ – a phenomenon that Soviet scientists, too, had begun to worry about. Fluctuations of several centimetres a year were considered normal, but after 1932 the sea level dropped by several decimetres, in some years by nearly half a metre. Every hydrologist had his own explanation. One found it in the precipitation data of the Volga drainage basin; another claimed that the irrigation works in the Black Earth region were beginning to take their toll. There were hypotheses galore, but no one came up with a conclusive answer.

From the Chemitrust boardroom the consequences could be seen with the naked eye: the ever-seething mouth of the Caspian Sea was in danger of silting up. On the roadstead of Kara Bogaz Seaport, the industrial outpost built on this narrow strait, shallows and sandbanks suddenly appeared. Anyone watching the ships from the pier could hear the curses of the steersmen, often loud and clear.

In the past, the high rate of evaporation in the lagoon had always ensured a profuse and constant inflow. Over a distance of some five or six kilometres the water rushed in through the twisting Adzhi Darya (Turkmen for ‘Bitter River’). It carried all sorts of fish, which became pickled and rose to the top of the evaporation pan within a few hours. Only the seals could cope with the suction,

and seemed to enjoy this ‘marine waterfall’ as much as they did the surf elsewhere on the coast.

But because of the drop in sea level of the Caspian, the profuse inflow started to subside and freighters could no longer tie up. On the quay lay sacks of dehydrated sulphate, the first semi-finished Chemitrust product, but how could you get them into a ship’s hold?

‘We are forced to run after the retreating sea,’ the harbourmaster reported, whereupon Rubinshtayn had the jetties extended into the Caspian.

Hydrochemists from the Academy of the Sciences arrived, together with a sea-grey sloop, diving suits, pH meters, and a case of test tubes for water samples. By their calculations, a further drop in the inflow was likely to disturb the ion balance, so that crystallization would no longer yield the valuable Glauber salt ( $\text{Na}_2\text{SO}_4$ ) but only sodium chloride ( $\text{NaCl}$ ), common or garden kitchen salt. To prevent this alteration of the salt balance, the Academy urged the speedy dredging of the strait. Were the bay to lose its sulphate-yielding function all the same, then a pumping engine would have to be brought in to force water from the Caspian into the lagoon.

Moscow rejected these proposals as being too costly. Moreover, it was quite on the cards that the level of the Caspian might rise again by itself. Perhaps the fall was no more than a cyclical fluctuation, and hence a purely temporary phenomenon.

In the Central Control Committee, a vigilant sector of the Communist Party, there was little interest in such technical details. All the members noted was that the output of Chemitrust had declined sharply under Jacov Rubinshtayn. In 1933, sulphate production was no more than sixty per cent of the norm set by Moscow, and the figures for 1934 threatened to be even more disappointing.

Prior to a possible criminal investigation, the Control Committee ordered the director to hand in a brief ‘autobiography’. As a result, three A4 sheets submitted in 1934 were added to his personal file without marginal comments.

Rubinshtayn had fed the first of several sheets of paper into his typewriter and began his life story as follows:

‘I was born in Warsaw in 1895. My father was an insurance agent and earned a little extra money by selling lottery tickets. My mother was a housewife. I am the eldest son. My birth was followed by that of another son and of a daughter. Between the ages of six and nine, I attended the *cheder* (talmud school); between the ages of nine and fifteen, I attended the (private) technical school, which I could not finish for lack of money. For that reason I took private lessons with a student, Przybicewski by name, to pass the examination as an external student. Przybycewski was a member of the Polish Socialist Party (the *lewica*). He thought that I could be of use to him and asked me to hand out pamphlets. I became actively involved in the work of the *lewica* and distributed literature in Sedlets, where I was arrested for the first time (I had meanwhile passed the technical-school examinations). After two months of solitary confinement I was released as a minor, my father having agreed to put up the bail for me.’

Young Jacov was undeterred: before the outbreak of the First World War, he saw numerous prisons and labour camps from the inside. His mother, brother and sister emigrated to the United States in the nick of time and found employment in a straw-hat factory. Father Rubinshtayn, who had stayed behind, was expelled from Warsaw on the grounds that his son was a militant socialist, and died in 1919 in a small Polish provincial town. At the time, Jakov was already in the Ukraine, where he continued to do underground work until the arrival of the Bolsheviks. For nearly a year, he served as an officer in the Red Cavalry immortalized by Isaac Babel (or more precisely in the First Cavalry Army under General Budyenny), and after the end of the civil war, he held countless administrative posts from chief inspector in the meat preservation industry to chairman of the Russo-Canadian Trade Relations Board.

Reading the signs of the times, Rubinshtajjn ended his ‘autobiography’ with a report of two earlier lapses, thus heeding the unwritten demand for self-criticism.

‘In 1929, at a meeting of the Party cell I put forward a mistaken view on the peasant question. A few days later, I realised my mistake and said so publicly.

In 1930, I was rebuked by the Central Control Committee for lack of self-control and tactlessness (I had failed to notice sabotage activities in the canning industry in time). The rebuke went hand in hand with a ban on holding executive posts for two years, a decision reviewed and revoked by the Central Committee of the Communist Party upon my appointment as head of Kara Bogaz Chemitrust.’

As predicted by the hydrochemists, the salt ridges on the beach changed their composition in the middle thirties. The reduced inflow led to condensation of the salt solution, with the result that kitchen salt was precipitated instead of Glauber salt.

The first person to notice was the captain of the tug *Serbia*, who had left one of the salt extraction sites with a cargo of sulphate blocks for Kara Bogaz Seaport. Amansoltan had incorporated his report in her thesis verbatim.

‘There was no wind,’ the captain had reported to Rubinshtayn. ‘We were crossing the bay at three-quarter speed, and though the boiler raised enough pressure, I noticed that we were slowing down.’ The captain ordered ‘full steam ahead’, whereupon the tug started to tremble and shake but did not go a single knot faster. On the contrary, the *Serbia* ground to a juddering halt. The captain then ordered a sailor to inspect the screw. The boy jumped overboard reluctantly and came up again a minute later saying that he could not find the screw. ‘Instead, there is a lump of salt,’ he called out to the hilarious laughter of the rest of the crew.

Because the captain thought that the sailor was pulling his leg, he himself dived under the stern – only to arrive at the same conclusion.

Kitchen salt. It was the umpteenth plague to smite Rubinshtayn. First his harbour had silted up, and now there was this worthless salt. It was not long before the director began to receive disturbing reports from quality controllers in

Astrakhan, who had turned down consignments of sodium sulphate because it was contaminated with sodium chloride ‘up to twenty per cent’. They did not say it in so many words, but the suspicion, as it were, dripped off the paper: Comrade Rubinshtayn was trying to hide his disappointing production figures by resorting to common fraud. His Jewishness was anything but a mitigating factor, and from the following documents in his file it looked very much as if the noose was tightening around his neck.

A letter written on 1 April 1937 to Nikolay Yezhov, the newly appointed head of the NKDV, the Soviet secret police, was headed STRICTLY SECRET. In it Secretary Titov of the Turkmen Communist Party refers to the ‘bungling work’ of two Turkmen NKVD agents, who were unsuccessful in digging up enough incriminating material for use against Comrade Jacov Rubinshtayn.

‘It seems to me that the NKVD section in Turkmenistan is not up to the job. Would it not be better to conduct the investigation of the head of Chemitrust directly from Moscow?’

Titov enclosed a carbon copy of the ‘rebuke’ the suspect – for that was what Rubinshtayn had become – had been given in 1930. He obviously did not think it worth mentioning that his punishment had been almost immediately ‘revised and revoked’.

The following document is of considerable importance. It is a secret ‘Decision’ by the presidium of the Turkmen Communist Party of 10 May 1937:

Having heard:

the report by Comrade Gotlober on counter-revolutionary Trotskyist activities in the Kara Bogaz Chemitrust, including sabotage and espionage, supported with evidence from the federal bureau of the NKDV;

having established:

that the sulphate deposits in the Bay of Kara Bogaz have dwindled due to mismanagement over at least five years;  
that despite an investment of seventeen million roubles, sulphate production has declined from 78,000 tons in 1932 to 70,000 tons in 1936;  
that the experimental sulphate plant was built by Rubinshtayn and his accomplices in a manner that must be described as sabotage (the walls are of inferior concrete);  
the Party Presidium has decided:  
1) To adopt the report by Comrade Gotlober in its entirety.  
2) To order the arrest of Rubinshtayn by the appropriate organs.

What else we know about the Jewish manager from Poland takes the form of two data in his posthumous rehabilitation documents:

- on 28 May 1937 he was arrested by NKVD-agents (and that self-same day stripped of his Party membership);
- and on 29 August 1938, the Military College of the Supreme Court of the Soviet Union sentenced him 'irrevocably and with immediate effect' to death by execution.

I wondered if Paustovski ever knew what happened to Rubinshtayn, and if so what precisely he was told and when.

As screenwriter of the Kara Bogaz film he worked towards a glorious ending. But anyone with the least idea of what actually happened is bound to conclude that Soviet propaganda must have begun to lose all touch with reality. Socialist realism and reality had drifted worlds apart.

In the spring of 1935, while the film was still being made, physicists became convinced that the Kara Bogaz Harbour settlement had been built on a drying strait and was thus unfortunately in quite the wrong place. But afraid of Stalin's anger, none of them said so openly. Amansoltan Saparova recorded in her thesis that one salt-extraction site after the next was shut down. No sulphate at all was

being precipitated. The only source still in operation was artificial Lake No. 6; for the rest the exploitation of the Bay of Kara Bogaz had to be written off as a failure. By the end of 1938, Kara Bogaz had turned into a deserted industrial ruin – ten years after its foundation.

The contrast with what I had been shown on the screen could not have been greater. The lyricist Paustovski continued the line started in 1932 as a steeply ascending curve. In the film, he had a futuristic desalination basin powered by solar energy rise up on the barren coast. It was a plant with ingenious pipe work and electric control panels. During the festive inauguration, the nomads approached the plant with obvious trepidation. The men were wearing turbans and the women had covered their faces with the corners of a headscarf. Crouching or sitting cross-legged and holding up small earthenware bowls, they kept staring at the Soviet magicians who claimed they could render Caspian seawater fit to drink.

Someone takes a sip and spits it out – phew, nothing but sea salt. Laughter in the empty hall. The pipes fill with what is plainly salt water. But then a sturdy Russian woman opens a tap with both hands, there is a lot of hissing and bubbling, and after a circus roll that lasts for a good minute, water splatters into a zinc bucket. A sceptical *tabib* is allowed to hold his bowl under the stream, and lo! the water is sweet.

A moment later, someone sings an aria. From the cinema loudspeakers booms the voice of a famous ‘people’s artist’. He sings about ‘Stalin’s messengers’ who had come to this ‘distant land’ with a generous heart. In the film, we see the same men and women who had just witnessed the water-transforming feat. All of them are now dressed in white blouses and workmen’s shirts; their black hair washed and cut short. You can see them behind the control panel, bent over a nanometer, or outside wielding combination pliers beside a circus breaker.

The last image before the lights came on is a close-up of sliced pomegranates and melons, fruit grown in the desert with desalinated water.

‘Turkmenistan – land of milk and honey,’ I say, hoping that Igor Vasiliev will not be offended by my cynicism.

The conservator was already reeling the film off the spool and asked me to hand him the two flat halves of the can.

‘I imagine,’ I tried to sweeten my remark, ‘the public went home with a sense of pride after seeing this film.’

‘The public?’ Igor Vasiliev wiped his hands on the tail of his dustcoat and gave me a quizzical look. ‘There never was any public.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘The film was never shown. That’s why you had to pay the fee we charge for “unexhibited material”. You’ll find that clearly stated on your receipt.’

I fetched the small chit out of my trouser pocket, but not because I was worried about the fee; I needed a tangible object to help me concentrate. It took me a while to realise what had happened: the film had not been passed by the censor! But why? Surely not because conditions in the bay had been depicted in too favourable a light!

I asked Igor Vasiliev whether it had anything to do with Jacov Rubinshtayn.

He gave me a puzzled look. ‘I don’t know any Rubinshtayn. To tell you the truth, I don’t know what you are on about.’ Still, if I wanted to find out what had happened, I had to keep on his right side.

‘You have to remember,’ the conservator continued half way down the passage, ‘that in 1935, the atmosphere in Stalin’s inner circle was already thick enough to cut with a knife. Since the assassination of Sergei Kirov, the Leningrad Party chief, on 1 December 1934, the political bigwigs had been shaking in their boots, knowing that Stalin was using the murder as a pretext for making a clean sweep of his closest collaborators. At the time, an indefinable sense of danger hung in the air,’ Igor Vasiliev explained.

Back in his study, he hung his coat up on a hook. He drew up a chair and bent over a drawer. While his fingers travelled over the files, he observed that Stalin used to refer to films as ‘illusions’, and that he considered the cinema the

‘strongest weapon in the propaganda war’. Literature was small-arms stuff; acrobatics, music and the stage mere hand weapons. ‘In the thirties, SovKino, the state cinematographic service, was a powerful body into which a great deal of money had been put,’ Igor Vasiliev told me. ‘The head of SovKino had the status of a government minister.’

He extracted a plastic sleeve from a folder labelled ‘The Black Mouth’. It was a cutting from the ‘theatre and film’ column of *Izvestia* of 27 August 1935, written by Henri Barbusse, the French communist author.

Barbusse was in Moscow trying to have his French Stalin biography published there, the conservator explained. As a friend of Gorki, he was treated with great respect, and to acquaint him with the early fruits of Soviet culture he was shown *The Black Mouth*, then due for final editing. He expressed his appreciation in a few words under the title of Kara Bogaz.

I feel honoured to have been shown a new Soviet film, even before its première. The film (*Kara Bogaz*) tells of the heroic attempts by Soviet man to bring industry and progress to the eastern shore of the Caspian Sea. By applying scientific insights he succeeds in transforming brine into drinking water. Bolshevik technology leads to victory. This marvellous film, based on the widely-read book by Konstantin Paustovski, immortalises many truly socialist aspects of life.

What was wrong with that?

‘Nothing with the writing. Only with the fact that Monsieur Barbusse saw the film before Stalin did.’ Igor Vasiliev went on to say that he and his colleagues had also been unable to fathom why Kara Bogaz had never been released for public showing. They had made it a point to find out and had finally called on the now ancient son of the film director. ‘He told us that the history of *The Black Mouth* was a secret his father preferred to take to his grave.’

It all boiled down to the fact that Stalin had got wind of the *Izvestia* article. He was furious that he had been passed by as the Soviet Union's First Critic, and demanded an explanation from Comrade Boris Shumiatski, the head of the cinematographic service. As soon as this minister of cinematographic affairs heard that he had been summoned to appear before the Kremlin chief, and why, he became paralysed with fear.

'He thought his last hour had struck,' Igor Vasiliev said, 'that, in the wake of the Kirov affair, he was bound to be labelled an enemy of the people.'

Shumiatski decided that attack was the best form of defence. He would lie to Stalin. And so he insisted that Barbusse had muddled things up: the Frenchman had, admittedly, seen a film but not *The Black Mouth*. The final set hadn't even been struck yet! Probably, Shumiatski continued, rumours had been spread by envious film directors. Obviously, sectarianism was still rife in this profession, and the minister promised to get to the bottom of this whole business and make sure the guilty were punished.

'Back in his ministry, Shumiatski decided to wipe out all traces of *The Black Mouth*,' Igor Vasiliev continued.

'Under the circumstances it's a miracle that the reels were preserved,' I ventured.

'No, no,' said the conservator. 'He kept those deliberately on tap. If Stalin ever asked to see them, he could produce them in no time at all.'

The minister summoned Konstantin Paustovski and of course the film director as well. The three of them devised a plan to sweep the entire project under the carpet as discreetly as possible. Not to arouse any suspicion, they would go on with the final montage, be it on the backburner. However, Shumiatski never presented the final version 'with its many truly socialist aspects of life' to the film selection board, let alone the film distributors. The strategy (let's forget all about it in the hope Stalin will forget all about it as well) was risky, but the alternative (releasing the film for public display) was riskier still.

‘Don’t forget,’ said Igor Vasiliyev. ‘A critic had only to recall Barbusse’s *Izvestia* article, and heads were bound to roll.’

‘Lying to Stalin was not a trifling matter,’ I ventured to say.

‘It came straight under Article 58, counter-revolutionary activities, the same category as “squandering national funds”, “Trotskyite sabotage”, and “spreading anti-Soviet propaganda”.’

The terminology had begun to sound familiar. I nodded and fell silent. What else was there to say?

When I took my leave, I told Igor Vasiliev about Jacov Rubinshtayn, who he was and how he had found his end. The conservator listened politely – for him this was just one story in a thousand.

Outside again, I realised how little it would have taken for Paustovski to share his film hero’s fate. Ignoring the expensive display windows and the glittering shop fronts, I hastened through Tverskaya Street to the nearest metro stop. As soon as I was back home, I opened Paustovski’s autobiography. I paged through all six volumes and, to make doubly sure, through the rest of his work as well. A few hours later, I knew it beyond any doubt: nowhere in his writings had Paustovski wasted a single word on the filming of *The Bay of Kara Bogaz*.