

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn,

“New Generation”



# The New Generation

By Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (1993)

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They were writing the Strength of Materials exam.

Anatoly Pavlovich Vozdvizhensky, an engineer and associate professor in the Faculty of Civil Engineering, could see that his student Konoplyov's face was very flushed. He had broken into a sweat and had missed his turn to come up to the examiner's desk. Then, with a heavy gait, he approached and quietly asked for a different set of questions. Anatoly Pavlovich gazed at the sweaty face beneath a low forehead and met the desperate, imploring look in his bright eyes—and he gave him some new questions.

Another 90 minutes passed, a few more students had already submitted their answers, and the last four in the class were already sitting before him ready to present their results, but Konoplyov, who had been sitting among them and who now seemed even more flushed, was still not ready.

He sat there until all the others had left. The two were now alone in the lecture hall.

“All right, Konoplyov, your time's up,” said Vozdvizhensky, firmly but not crossly. By now it was clear enough that this fellow didn't have a clue about anything. The few scribbles on his paper bore little resemblance to formulas, and his diagrams bore little resemblance to engineering drawings.

The broad-shouldered Konoplyov rose, his face covered with sweat. He did not go to the blackboard to write his answers but plodded over to the nearest desk, settled himself behind it, and in the most artless and open-hearted way said: “Anatoly Palych, this stuff's so complicated it's bugged up my whole brain.”

“Then you have to apply yourself methodically to your work.”

“Methodically, Anatoly Palych? That's what they tell us in all the courses, and there ain't a day passes when they don't. I never fool around and I'm at the books every night, but the stuff still won't get through my thick skull. Maybe if they didn't throw so much at us and took it a little easier. But it just won't sink in—I'm not cut out for this sort of thing.”

His eyes looked out earnestly, and his voice was sincere; he wasn't lying, and he didn't look like a loafer.

“You came here from the Workers' Faculty?”

“Uh-huh.”

“How long were you there?”

“I took a two-year intensive course.”

“And what did you do before that?”

“I was at the Red Aksai Factory. A tinsmith.”

His nose was large and broad, his face large boned, his lips thick.

This was not the first time Vozdvizhensky had wondered why they put fellows like him through such torment. He'd be better off making pots and pans in Aksai.

“I sympathize, but there's nothing I can do. I have to fail you.”

But Konoplyov would not accept this and did not pull out his student record book. But he did press both his paw-like hands to his chest.

“Anatoly Palych, this just can't be. It's bad enough they'll take away part of my scholarship. And the Komsomol will give me a real blast. But no matter what they do, I ain't never gonna make it through strength of materials. What'll I do now? My life's been dragged upside and down, and I'm out of place here.”

Well, that was obvious enough.

There were a good many of these fellows from the Workers' Faculty whose lives had been “dragged upside and down.” What on earth were the authorities thinking when they pushed them into universities? They must have anticipated cases like this. The administration had given unambiguous instructions to make allowances for people from the Workers' Faculties. It was part of their policy of mass education.

Make allowances—but how far could you go? Some of the Workers' Faculty people had taken exams today, and Vozdvizhensky had been fairly tolerant with them. But not to the point of absurdity! How could he give a pass to this fellow when he doesn't know a thing? Everything I've tried to teach him has gone right over his head. As soon as he begins engineering it'll be obvious that he hasn't a clue about strength of materials.

He said, “I can't do it.” And he said it again.

Yet Konoplyov kept begging, almost in tears—a rare thing to see in a roughneck like him.

And Anatoly Pavlovich thought: if the authorities have such a strict policy and are fully aware of the absurdities it creates, then why should I care more than they do?

He gave Konoplyov a little lecture, advising him how to change his study habits, how to read aloud to help him absorb the material, and what he should do to get his thoughts organized.

He took his student record. He heaved a deep sigh. Slowly and deliberately he wrote in “pass” and signed.

Konoplyov, radiant, jumped to his feet: “I'll never forget this, Anatoly Palych! Maybe I'll squeak through my other subjects, but that strength of materials is queer stuff for sure.”

The Institute of Railways and Highways was on the outskirts of Rostov, and Anatoly Pavlovich had a long journey home. Riding in the streetcar he could see how shabby and nondescript his fellow

passengers had become over the past years. Anatoly Pavlovich wore a modest and well-worn suit but still kept his white collar and tie. But now there were some professors in the institute who made a point of going about in a simple shirt, belted and worn outside their trousers. In spring one of them would wear sandals over his bare feet. This no longer astonished anyone and was completely in keeping with the spirit of the times. This was how the times were changing, and everyone was put out when they saw the wives of the NEP-men decked out in fancy dresses.

Anatoly Pavlovich arrived home just at the dinner hour. His exuberant wife, Nadya, the light of his life, was now in Vladikavkaz with their elder son, newly married and a railway engineer like his father. A cook fixed the meals in Vozdvizhensky's apartment three times a week, though today was not one of her days. But his daughter, Lyolka, bustled about energetically to make sure her father was properly fed. Their square oak table was already set and had a sprig of lilac at its center. She brought in a pitcher of vodka from the icebox for his invariable daily drink, taken from a small silver goblet. She heated and then served him soup with pastries.

She was making wonderful progress in her eighth grade at school, taking physics, chemistry, and math. She excelled at drawing and had her heart set on entering the same institute where her father taught. But four years ago a decree of 1922 had made it mandatory to filter the applicants and strictly limit the number of those of non-proletarian origin. Entrants not recommended by the party or the Komsomol had to present proof of their political reliability. (His son had managed to enroll the year before the decree.)

The way he had stretched the truth in Konoplyov's record book today continued to weigh heavily on his conscience.

He asked Lyolka about her school. The whole nine-year school (the Zinoviev School, though the name had now been erased from the sign) had been shaken by a recent suicide: a few months before the end of the school year a grade-nine student, Misha Derevyanko, had hanged himself. There was a hasty funeral, and immediately thereafter all the grades held meetings for criticism and tongue-lashings: this event had been a product of bourgeois individualism and a symptom of the moral decay of everyday life; Derevyanko was nothing more than a spot of rust that everyone must scrape away. Lyolka and her two friends, though, were sure that Misha had been badgered by the school's Komsomol cell.

Today she was worried and added something that was no longer a rumor but a certain fact: the school principal, Malevich—a man everyone adored, an old teacher from a pre-revolutionary *gimnaziya* who had somehow held on for all these years and who kept the whole school running like a well-regulated machine through his cheerful discipline—Malevich was being *removed*.

Lyolka ran off to the primus stove for the beef Stroganoff, and then they had tea and pastries.

The father gazed at his daughter with tenderness. How proudly she tossed back her head with its curls of chestnut hair (she had no interest in the fashion for keeping hair short); and how intelligent she looked as she crinkled her forehead and spoke her mind so precisely and simply.

As is often the case with girls, her face expressed the wonderful riddle of her future. But as her father gazed at it, this riddle had become a nagging ache: how could he determine what would become of her in this future that no one could predict? Would these many years of growth, education, and concern for her reach a triumphant conclusion, or would it they do her damage?

“Just the same, Lyolyenka, you can't avoid joining the Komsomol. You've only one year more, and you can't take the risk. Otherwise they won't accept you anywhere, and I won't be able to help you get into my institute either.”

"I don't want to!" She tossed her head, setting her hair awry. "The Komsomol is disgusting."

Anatoly Pavlovich sighed once more.

"You know," he suggested gently, and indeed, he fully believed it himself, "this new generation of young people really does have something, some truth that we can't fully understand. They certainly must have something."

Three generations of the intelligentsia could not have been mistaken about how to give the people access to culture and liberate their energies. Of course, not everyone has what it takes to cope with this surge ahead, this leap forward. The mental effort is simply too much, and they don't always have the strength of character—it's no easy thing to educate oneself outside the framework of years of inherited tradition. But we absolutely must help them scale the heights and patiently put up with their sometimes clumsy escapades.

"Yet you must agree that they have amazing optimism and a powerful faith in their cause that we can only envy. And you simply can't avoid swimming along in this stream, my dear, or you might well let the whole Epoch slip past, as they say. What's being created—and granted, it's being created stupidly, clumsily, and by fits and starts—is something majestic. The whole world is watching and holding its breath, all the intelligentsia of the West. People in Europe aren't fools, after all."

After successfully ridding himself of his strength of materials course, Lyoshka Konoplyov was happy to join his comrades who were going to the Lenin Regional Soviet House of Culture that evening. The gathering was not only for Komsomol members; some of the new generation's non-party young folks had also come. A fellow from Moscow was giving a talk—"On the Tasks of Today's Youth."

The hall held about 600, and it was crammed full, some even standing. There was a whole lot of red to be seen: at the back of the platform were two red banners embroidered with gold, spread out and leaning toward each other; in front of them, high as your chest, was a bronze-colored Lenin on a post. The girls had red kerchiefs round their necks, and a few had bands of red calico round their heads; the Young Pioneer leaders all wore red pioneer neck scarves and some had brought a few of the older pioneers, who were sitting with their leaders.

So here we were, a united crowd, all us young people close friends, even though we don't know each other: this is what we are, we're all *our people*, all of us like one. Builders of the New World, as they say. And knowing that gives each one of us the strength of three.

Then three buglers marched out to the front of the platform, also with red cloths dangling from their bugles. They formed up in a row and blew the call to muster. The call of those buglers came like the crack of a whip and it brought the whole crowd to life. There was something in this grand ceremony of coming together that just seemed to draw you in—the red banners by the corner, the bronze Lenin, the gleaming silver of the bugles, the proud bearing of the buglers, and the piercing sounds they made. It hit you like some great battle cry, like making a solemn promise under oath.

The buglers stepped off smartly in line. Then out marched the speaker, a short, fat little fellow who couldn't keep his arms still. He took his place behind the rostrum and started to talk—quickly, confidently, forcefully—and he didn't read it from a paper, it was all from his head.

First he talked about how living through the great but stormy times of Revolution and Civil War had disrupted the lives of young people, but at the same time it had forced them to turn away from the pettiness and dullness of everyday reality.

“This transition has been hard for you, this new generation. The emotions brought on by the events of revolution are felt particularly keenly by young people like you who are at the age of transition. A few of you might think that it would be much more fun to begin a real revolution all over again: you would know at once what you had to do and where you had to go. Hurry up—press on, blow up something, shake up something, otherwise what was the point of October? Take China, now—they need a revolution, and why isn’t one starting? What a fine thing it would be to live and fight for World Revolution, but here we are, forced to study some rubbish like theorems in geometry, and what’s the point of that?”

Or strength of materials. He’s right, there’s a better use for idle arms and legs, and a better place for strong backs.

“But no,” the speaker urged them, and he came out from behind his rostrum and trotted across the stage, getting really carried away by his own speech.

“You have to understand the present moment correctly and master it. Our young people are the most fortunate in the entire history of humanity. They are ready for battle, ready to take a productive place in life. Their qualities are, first, godlessness, a sense of complete freedom from all that is unscientific. The huge store of confidence and thirst for life that the old beliefs once held in check have now been unleashed. The second quality of our new generation is avant-gardism and planetism, the need to be at the forefront of our epoch. Our friends and our enemies are watching us.”

And he turned his little head to gaze around the hall, as if seeking out those friends—and particularly those enemies—from all the distant lands across the seas.

“No more do we base our lives only on what we can see from our own doorstep. Now our young folks examine every detail of life but do so exclusively from a universal point of view. Then there is the third quality: a scrupulous class consciousness, a necessary though temporary rejection of ‘the sense of humanity in general.’ And then comes optimism!”

He approached the very edge of the platform and, showing no concern about tumbling off, he leaned toward the crowd as far as he could: “You must realize! You are the most exuberant young people in the world! What staunchness and determination this joyous energy gives you!”

He trotted across the stage again, never stopping the flow of his speech: “And then you have the thirst for knowledge. And the scientific organization of your labor. And you want to rationalize your biological processes as well. You have a militant passion—and what a passion it is! You also want to become leaders. And your organic, class brotherhood has given you a sense of collectivism, one that has been so ingrained that the collective even involves itself in the intimate lives of its members. And that is just as it should be!”

Even though the speaker was acting a bit like a clown, no one was laughing. They weren’t whispering to one another; they were all ears. The speaker was helping these young people understand themselves, and that was a useful thing. As he grew more heated he would raise one short arm and then both, as if calling out to them, as if to convince them completely.

“Look also at the young women of this new generation, and how they have become aware of the power of the socialism we are creating ... In only a few short years women have acquired personal freedom in their intimate lives—sexual liberation. And a woman demands that a man reexamine relationships, otherwise she herself will break down the backward, slave-owning attitudes of the male as she brings a revolutionary freshness into sexual morality. And so the revolutionary resultant force is being sought and is being found in the realm of love as well: we switch our bioenergy onto socially creative rails.”

He finished. But he didn't seem tired. He must be used to this. He headed back behind the rostrum. "Are there any questions?"

They began asking questions, right from their seats or in notes that were passed to him.

Most of the questions were about sexual liberation. One comment hit home for Konoplyov: "It's easy to say, 'Achieve a whole decade of development in two years,' but working at that pace might well kill you."

Then even the young pioneers felt bold enough to ask some questions:

"Can a pioneer girl wear ribbons in her hair?"

"Can she wear a bit of makeup?"

"And who should listen to whom: a good pioneer to a bad father, or a bad father to a good pioneer?"

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As early as 1928, the Shakhty Affair, so close to Rostov, had thrown a huge scare into the city's engineering fraternity. And here, too, people had begun to *disappear*.

It took some time to grow accustomed to this. Before the Revolution, an arrested person continued living behind bars or in exile, keeping in touch with his family and friends. But now? He simply dropped into oblivion ...

In the past September of 1930, there was an ominous rumbling across the land: 48 people—"wreckers in the food supply chain"—were sentenced to be shot. "Responses from workers" appeared in the newspapers: "Wreckers must be wiped from the face of the earth!" The front page of *Izvestia* proclaimed: "Crush the serpent beneath your heel!" and the proletariat demanded that the OGPU be awarded the Order of Lenin.

In November they published the indictment in the case of "The Industrial Party," and that meant a direct attack on the engineers. Once more the chilling phrases appeared in the newspapers: "Agents of the French interventionists and White émigrés," and "Sweep away these traitors with an iron broom!"

Such things tore at your heart, but you were helpless. Not everyone could even express their fears, and those who did could only speak to someone they knew well, as well as Anatoly Pavlovich had known Friedrich Albertovich these past 10 years.

There was a four-hour demonstration in Rostov on the day the Industrial Party trial began, with the demonstrators demanding that all the accused be shot! It was unbearably vile. (Vozdvizhensky had managed to wriggle out of it and did not attend.)

Living day after day, feeling the tension and the darkness within, the sense of doom grew ever stronger. But why would they come for him? He had worked as if inspired all through Soviet times; he was resourceful, he believed in what he was doing, and it was only the stupidity and shoddy practices of the party bosses that hindered him at every step.

One night, less than two months after the trial, they *came* for Vozdvizhensky.

Then began an incomprehensible, nightmarish time of delirium, and it went on for many days and nights. It began with being stripped naked, having all the buttons of your clothes cut off and the soles of your shoes pierced with an awl; it continued in a stifling underground chamber with no ventilation, breathing air already breathed by many people. There was not a single window and never the light of day, but set in the ceiling were squares of bottle glass you couldn't see through. In this cell without beds you slept on the floor, on concrete that had been covered with loose planks. Everyone was stupefied from nighttime interrogations, some beaten until they were covered with bruises, others with hands burned by cigarette butts, some sitting in silence, others telling half-insane stories. Vozdvizhensky had never once been called out or touched by anyone, but his mind had already been shaken from its foundations and could no longer grasp what was happening or even connect itself with his former life—now, alas, gone forever. His poor health meant that he hadn't been called up for the German War; no one had bothered him during the Civil War that had run violently through Rostov-Novochoerkassk. He had spent a quarter century at deliberate intellectual labor, and now he could only tremble each time the door opened, by day or by night: had they come for him? There was no way he was prepared to stand up under torture!

He wasn't called out, however. Everyone in the cell in this underground warehouse was amazed. (Only later did they realize it actually was a warehouse, and the thick glass apertures in the ceiling were set into the sidewalk on the city's main street, along which carefree pedestrians constantly passed, people who had not yet been doomed to end here; and they could feel the walls tremble as streetcars passed above).

They didn't call him out. Everyone was amazed: these newcomers usually get dragged out straightaway.

So maybe it really was a mistake? Maybe they would let him go?

But on one of those days—he had lost count which one—he was called out. “Hands behind your back,” and a warder with jet-black hair led him out and then up a flight of stairs—to ground level?—and then higher and higher, several stories, the whole while clucking his tongue like some mysterious bird.

An interrogator in a GPU uniform sat at a desk in a shadowy room. You could barely make out his features, only that he was young and broad-faced. He silently pointed to a tiny table that stood in the opposite corner, diagonally from his desk. Vozdvizhensky found himself sitting on a narrow chair, facing a gloomy window some distance away. The lamp had not been turned on.

He waited with sinking heart. The interrogator continued to write in silence.

Then he said, severely: “Tell me about your wrecking activities.”

Vozdvizhensky was more astonished than frightened. “There was never anything of the sort, I assure you!” He wanted to add a perfectly reasonable thought: how can *an engineer* spoil anything?

But after the Industrial Party affair?

“Never mind that, just tell me.”

“There was nothing, it could never happen!”

The interrogator went on writing but still didn't switch on the lamp. Then, without getting to his feet, he said in a firm voice: “You've had a good look at your cell? But you haven't seen everything yet. We can have you can sleep on concrete without any planks. Or in some damp pit. Or keep you under a 1,000-watt light that'll blind you.”

Vozdvizhensky could barely prop up his head in his hands. They really could do any of these things. And how would he ever endure it?

At this point the interrogator switched on his desk lamp, rose, switched on the overhead light and moved to the middle of the room to look at the person he was interrogating.

Though he wore a Chekist's uniform, his face looked utterly simple and naïve. Broad-boned, a short, wide nose, and thick lips.

Then, in a milder voice: "Anatoly Palych, I know very well that you weren't involved in wrecking. But even you have to understand that *from here* no one leaves with an acquittal. It's either a bullet in the back of the neck or a term in the camps."

It was not the harsh language, it was the kindly voice that amazed Vozdvizhensky. He stared fixedly at the interrogator's face, and saw something familiar in it. It was such a simple face. Had he seen it before?

The interrogator went on standing in the middle of the room, under the light. He said not a word.

Vozdvizhensky knew he'd seen him before. But he couldn't recall where.

"You don't remember Konoplyov?" he asked.

Konoplyov! Of course! The fellow who didn't know his strength of materials. And who then disappeared from the faculty.

"Yes, I didn't finish at the institute. On orders of the Komsomol they took me into the GPU. I've been here three years."

So what now?

They chatted a bit, quite easily, a normal human conversation. Just as if it were happening in *that* life, before the nightmare.

Konoplyov said: "Anatoly Palych, the GPU doesn't make mistakes. No one ever gets out of here just like that. And though I'd like to help you, I don't know how I can. So think about it. You have to make up something."

Vozdvizhensky returned to the cellar with new hope.

But also with a fog whirling about in his mind. He wouldn't be able to *make up* anything.

But then to go to a camp? To Solovki?

He was struck and encouraged by Konoplyov's sympathy. Inside *these* walls? In a place like this?

He thought about these people from the Workers' Faculties who were now rising through the ranks. What he had seen of them until now was something different: a crude, conceited fellow had been Vozdvizhenky's boss when he worked as an engineer. And in the school that Lyolka had finished some dimwit had been assigned to replace the gifted Malevich.

And, to be sure, poets long before the Revolution had foreseen it and predicted the coming of these new *Huns* ...

After three more days in the cellar under the street, beneath the steps of unsuspecting passersby, Konoplyov summoned him again.

Vozdvizhensky still hadn't thought of anything to make up.

"But you must," Konoplyov insisted. "There's nothing else you can do. Please, Anatoly Palych, don't make me resort to *measures*. Or have them give you a new interrogator. Then you've had it for sure."

Meanwhile, he was moved to a better cell—less damp and with bunks to sleep in. They gave him some tobacco and allowed him to receive a parcel from home. The joy over the parcel came not because of the food and clean underwear it contained, it came because his family now knew he was *here!* And alive. (His wife would get his signature on the receipt for the parcel.)

Konoplyov summoned him again and again tried to persuade him. But how could he dishonor his 20 years of diligent, absorbing work? Simply—how could he dishonor himself, his very soul?

As for Konoplyov, he would now pass on the investigation—*inconclusive*—to someone else.

Another day Konoplyov told him: "I've thought of something and made the arrangements. There's a way you can be let out: just sign a promise to supply us with the information we need."

Vozdvizhensky recoiled: "How can that be ...? How ...? What ...? And what information can I give you?"

"About the mood among the engineers. About some of your acquaintances, Friedrich Werner, for instance. And there's others on the list."

Vozdvizhensky squeezed his head in his hands: "That I can *never* do!!"

Konoplyov shook his head. He simply couldn't believe it.

"So—is it the camps? Just keep in mind: your daughter will also get kicked out of her last year as a class alien. And maybe your possessions and your apartment will be confiscated. I'm doing you a big favor."

Anatoly Pavlovich sat there, unable to feel the chair beneath him and scarcely able to see Konoplyov right before him.

He dropped his head on the little table—and broke into sobs.

A week later he was set free.

