

The last time Pochamir had been in jail – at the time of the Bukhara Revolution, which he had also interpreted as the end of the world – it had been for over six months, and towards the end of the first month he had got so bored that he had begun repairing his cellmates' boots, using waxed thread from his own belt. Noticing this, one of the guards, a Bukhara Jew by the name of Elias, decided to employ the prisoner to repair his own down-at-heel boots. One thing led to another and it wasn't long before Pochamir had repaired the shoes of every one of Elias's relatives; only after Pochamir had completed this task did Elias mention him to his colleagues and to the director of the prison. Then, however, he was visited by a new thought: the boots Pochamir repaired looked as good as new – what if they supplied him with material and opened a workshop? There was also Elias's son, Yusuf – until recently he had been in the habit of taking leather from old boots in order to make catapults, but the other day he had all of a sudden used leather from a catapult to repair a boot Elias had forgotten to take to Pochamir.

In a word, old Elias made the most of centuries' and generations' worth of cunning and mother-wit and agreed with Pochamir that they should set up a home – or rather cell – workshop: Elias would supply Pochamir with black leather from the jackets of Bolsheviks or Chekists who had fallen into disfavour and been shot, Pochamir would make this leather into boots, and Yusuf would sell these boots in the Toki Sarrofon Bazaar. Elias had asked for only one thing when he prayed to his Jewish god – for Pochamir to stay in prison for a long time and be quite forgotten about by the authorities – but the uncircumcised Kalinin had come to Bukhara and visited its chaikhanas and prisons, as if they were the only places where an old revolutionary like himself could feel at home, and had written about Pochamir and his boots in the Bolshevik 'Local Pravda'. The Party investigation had lasted for six months, during the course of which Elias went on buying up the leather from the jackets of disgraced bosses and Yusuf went on trading the boots Pochamir made while he waited for his fate to be decided. But old Elias did more than this during those months; he also made his son Yusuf sit down by a paraffin lamp and study the seams and insoles of Pochamir's boots so that, when Pochamir was set free, the bullet-holed jackets of disgraced Bolsheviks and Chekists would not be left to rot in graves.

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From: 'The Railway'