Shortly after I discovered America (the word defect suggests error rather than flight to me) it became known that I had in my possession a valuable smuggled manuscript, and I was whisked to New York and interviewed on a number of early-morning and late-night television shows. At some point during every interview I found myself mumbling through my mustache, ‘Being a member of the Party was for me like being in prison.’ This awkward simile, intended as a slur on a bungling but well-intentioned organization, was misleading; in fact, I spent all my card-carrying years in real prisons of one sort or another. My convictions, moreover, have always been political. More of this later.

Speaking in a glare of arc lights with the snouts of television cameras sniffing my face, and of course exhausted by what the newspapers correctly described as my ordeal, I tend – I think most people do when speaking off the cuff – to simplify. To simplify is to falsify; I am grateful for this opportunity to set the record straight.

I am frankly tired of being badgered by sneering interviewers about the mistress whom I am suspected of having abandoned, the dozen or so children I am supposed to have fathered, and my so-called ‘Nazi connections’ (I will certainly get to the bottom of this last fabrication and make the inventor pay). Oh, all sorts of lies about my part in the Writers’ Union ado over a writer of clearly libelous novels; my mother – rest her soul – has been mentioned as having unkindly informed on my dad; I have been made out to be a perfectly horrible old menace. One interviewer asserted that I received a phone call late one night from our Party Chairman who asked, ‘What shall we do about Osip?’ My alleged reply to this was a silence resulting in Osip’s banishment and death. Rubbish! This fantastic concoction is made all the more crazy when one knows, as I do, that our Party Chairman, a superstitious soul, would never touch a telephone: he thought the mouthpiece of the receiver was a source of deadly germs. Another interviewer had the impertinence to ask, ‘Why was it that you were known as the Mephisto of the Twentieth Plenum?’ Spurning the assistance of the translator, I shot back quickly, ‘Could I help it if I was all things to all men?’ smartly putting a stop to his nonsense. I am especially sick of these interviewers looking over their clipboards into the camera lens and solemnly prefacing their questions with my full name – something that would only be done in my country in a courtroom or a grade school. Is this intentional ridicule (perhaps my name sounds a bit silly to the American tin ear?) or is it done for the benefit of viewers who have tuned in late and wonder, in their ample distraction, who is the hairy chap on the stool being abused? I know I lost my temper in front of (or so I was told) ten million viewers. There was a simple explanation for that. I had, at that point in the program, reached the conclusion that I

was not being interviewed but having my head examined. I have more than compensated the studio for all breakage and all injuries sustained.

On my arrival I graciously consented to the interviews, and now I am terminating them. I have four lawyers working day and night on what I believe are serious breaches of contract; it would be unfair of me to make more work for them by engaging in yet more of these abusive television shows. Editorial innuendo has not escaped my notice either. You are not easy with strangers, you are not above the petty suspicions of your peasant ancestors who left their plows and groped toward these shores as stowaways.

It is not as if I came to this country cap in hand pleading for asylum. Far from it. A narrow-shouldered Italian publisher of Iron Curtain horror stories dogged my heels throughout Europe. He tossed lire my way and, alternately whining and shrugging in the Italianate style, pestered me for a peek at the manuscript I kept photographed on a roll of film in my pocket. Others, French, German and English, each clamored for a hearing. I lunched with each but said no and fled west, leaving in my wake many a crestfallen editor. I am nagged by the thought that my negatives – the ones on my lips, not in my pocket – were a mistake. Both Stern and the London Sunday Observer offered particularly good terms, and Paris-Match dumped lashings of francs beside my plate. My accountant is understandably furious and keeps reminding me that on Jersey, in the Channel Islands, I could be living like a king, whereas here in America I am subjected to your spiteful taxes. But let this pass. The early brouhaha here has, after the expensive legal tangle, neither soothed nor enriched me. The bungalow that was so grandly presented to me after my arrival has a leaky roof and a perpetually flooded cellar; and my television is, as you say, on the fritz. Still, I can’t complain.

My concern is the diary. It is to this I now turn.

The manuscript that caused so many powerful Europeans to cluster about me is indeed a rare document and deserves patient study. I am happy to report that my present editor has consented to print it in full and has paid a substantial sum for the American rights. This is especially gratifying for, after getting to know you better, I find that you have really no taste for literature at all. Not like my country, where any garbage collector can sing grand opera or quote you whole cantos of the classics. You make a whole literature out of the sordid and silly nuances of Jewish behavior and, ironically, the writing style you most admire sounds like a direct translation from Perplexed Old Teutonic. You love obvious symbols and popular science. Long sentences annoy you, sentiment embarrasses you; you feel safe with alliteration – you think that is a sign of genius. Your heroes are as unlettered as their creators, your gods are all dogs, you have no appreciation of the simple human story.

The following diary if published in my country would be unacceptable and might land the author in jail. But this is not to say that we are an artless people. Other books have

readerships in the millions, they go through forty editions in a matter of weeks and have workers banging through the doors of bookshops at all hours. They are read on factory and farm; the authors are mobbed on the pavement, their names are household words, they get proposals of marriage in the morning mail.

Mind you, the present manuscript is an exception. The author is not heroic; he never did a stroke of work in his life. That he is a simple soul is apparent in every craven line he writes. He is not to be emulated, only studied. His story shows just the sort of quaint dilemma expressed in grumbles that is common to a certain sort of person – though no more common, I repeat, no more common in my country than in yours. Frankly speaking, when I left I was under the impression that this was someone only our system chucked up; but since being warmly welcomed in your very lovely country I have noticed that you get these deluded cranks too. And so take this as a cautionary tale: read it to those unkempt sons of yours who stuporously slope along wearing garish beads around their filthy necks; read it to your daughters who lick at drugs and keep condoms in their handbags, and to those uncles of yours who when their god failed began striking out, cursing us with the sorry wrath of the recently reconverted. And those of you who chaffed me about my ‘convenient departure’ and ‘untrustworthy explanations,’ remember that although I am hesitant to use this manuscript as a visa de voyage, I am aware that it gained me access to your country, and with it in my pocket I know I am welcome anywhere. You need me much more than I need you.

The pseudonymous author of this diary was known to me from youth. As the poet Drunina puts it so skillfully, ‘We were as twinned lambs that did frisk in the sun, / and bleat one at the other: what we changed / Was innocence for innocence …’ The difference, a large one, was that he made at least one big mistake and possibly more. This is clear in the text. The diary requires very little explanation except the following two points.

Number one, his name was not Jack Faust. Another Slav scurrying westward dropped half the letters from the dozen of his name and in doing so earned a permanent place in English literature (would anyone seriously believe a man called Korzeniowski capable of writing a story called ‘Because of the Dollars’?). I have taken that hint and expunged his real name and, on the advice of my present editor, adopted this crisp two-syllable alias. It is intentionally symbolic: a jack is used to hoist a heavy object; he is Jack, the object a weighty truth he was too simple to grasp wholly. For consistency I will neither name the country nor the prison in which this diary was written. This will not confuse anyone. Western readers are not unfamiliar with this prison, despite its edited anonymity. Our dungeons are as familiar to students of Eastern European political fortunes as our boarded-up synagogues are to anxiously vocal Western Jews who have never set foot in our country (name-calling is easy at that distance!). One has the impression that any regular reader of the current crop of frenzied memoirs by ex-Bolsheviks (‘The man of steel took me on his lap and cooed, “My little sparrowchik”’) would have no difficulty at all finding his way about in a penal colony in

Pskov, though he would probably become irretrievably lost in the rather grand Moscow metro or the modern Warsaw sink works. Even a dispirited and disaffected Party hack like myself is appalled by the general ignorance in the West of my country's achievements: sharp new flats have replaced cheesy peasant cottages, to name but one. Progress is progress; one should not hate the jackboot so much that one fails to notice whether it is down at the heel or making great strides. And simply because I was never given a chance to mention these things on television does not make them untrue.

Number two, what follows is a translation of the photographed manuscript I carried to America at great personal risk and sacrifice. I won't rub it in. No more explanation is in order. I can vouch for the truth of every word that 'Jack Faust' wrote and for the gaumlessness with which he set each down. I can see him licking his pencil lead and scribbling, scribbling.

12 Nov. I have committed no crime, but today I was arrested. My arm is still stiff from being twisted. I cannot write any more now except I am innocent. And this, though my hand pains me, I underline.

13 Nov. My arm still hurts.

14 Nov. Better. It happened in this way. Two burly secret policemen in shiny boots and well-cared-for truncheons beat at my door at five A.M. and told me to get dressed. I offered them buns. They refused saying, 'This is not a social call, Comrade Faust. We are here on Party business.' I asked one to pass me my new felt boots. 'You won't be doing much walking where you're going,' he said, and with that he kicked them out of my reach. As it turns out they would have come in quite handy. It is true I am in a small cell and do not walk much; but my feet are cold and I miss those boots. I hope Madam Zloty found them when she came to tidy up and had the good sense to pass them on to the chauffeur. The dopes will probably sell them, in which case I have the feeling the boots will eventually end up here: there seems to be quite a bit of black marketeering in this prison. Last night a voice whispered through the high window, 'Cigarettes, chewing gum, razor blades.' A small boy's voice, but I thought of Marushka with her little tray and her pathetic bunny costume and how she was so grateful when I befriended her. I mocked her crucifix and taught her to love the Party. If only she could see what the Party has done to me! And yet … and yet I find it hard to believe that the committee knows of this. Surely this is a trick. They are testing me. I make no observation except the following: it is said that the Marquis de Sade wrote Justine in prison on a roll of toilet paper. This strikes me as incredible. Mine is already coming to bits under the flint of my stubby pencil, and I am hardly past square one.

15 Nov. The warder's name has a familiar ring. 'Comrade Gold-pork doesn't allow reading in this prison,' the guard said when he saw me looking over some scraps of newspaper I found in the ticking of my mattress. 'Goldpork, Goldpork,' I murmured,

shredding the newspaper, ‘I know that name.’ I believe we were in the Youth Wing together. He used to slouch horribly, a poor specimen of a Youth Winger. How I remember him being shouted at by the Platoon Commander! ‘Pig! Dog! Twist of dogshit!’ the PC called at him. Goldpork stiffened under this abuse. Of course he could make no reply. A Youth Winger simply does not slouch. He stands straight as a ramrod; he snaps his salutes; he keeps his knickers in good order; he assiduously oils his truncheon. He coldly reports the activities of his grasping parents and notes how many pounds of lard have been hoarded by his mother. The Youth Wing is the backbone of the Party. Goldpork slouched and so was given the job of looking after this shabby penitentiary while I was composing rather hush-hush memoranda for B. And Goldpork doesn’t allow reading! I wonder if he himself can read? The guard gave the order so stupidly (Can he know who I am?) I am not surprised Goldpork never got further than this prison. If I had my way he would be scrubbing the toilets – that is, all the toilets except the one in which I scribble this!

17 Nov. Just to while away the time I have spent the past day and a half itemizing a clean-up and renovation memorandum. I haven’t lost my touch.

Memo to Goldpork

As this is not a fish tank surely moss and fungus are not needed to keep the inmates well and happy. Scrape those tiles and make them shine.

In my day, guards clicked their heels and polished their boots; the fact that guards are seen by no one but detainees should not excuse sloppy habits. Look smart.

Note that chamberpots are designed for easy emptying. It is axiomatic that the full chamberpot overflows.

There is an accumulation of rust on every iron bar in this prison. Prisoners should be made to feel that this is their prison as much as it is every citizen’s. A sense of pride and purpose is wanted; a rust-scrubbing session with wire brushes would do wonders for morale. Let’s buckle down.

We have noted a preponderance of nightly comings and goings of small boys in frocks. This seems a questionable way of passing an evening. Must moral fiber necessarily break down because a man is behind bars? Work, cold showers, an honest fatigue: such things build the Party.

We would like to see more prunes on the menu.

If reading is not allowed, surely the ticking of all prison mattresses should be winnowed for bits of newspaper. This is a sensible measure: any of these newspapers may have reports of past events which have since proved to be malicious fabrications.

We know many news items have been planted by foreign spies. Here, it is possible they will fall into the wrong hands. Sift, winnow, purge; get straw in those mattresses.

Laughter. Why in the world are prisoners allowed to laugh and shriek? A more somber note could be struck if each laugh were awarded five of the best. Experience has shown a yard of bamboo to be most useful for this.

The bindery is a shambles, a positive disgrace. We would like to see those glue pots kept in better order.

The inspections are a joke.

The above are noted in a spirit of cooperation, with the following in mind: a good prison is a clean one; no one will accuse the warder of being soft because he wants to run ‘a tight ship.’ Skimping will not do. The habits of youth are carried into middle age; there is a definite slouch about this place.

(signed) J. Faust

23 Nov. Have decided not to send the above to Goldpork as he may take it amiss and think I am trying to tell him how to do his job. I could send him memos until I was blue in the face and he would not pay any attention to me. When I am out of here he will have a lot of questions to answer. I shall keep my memo safe. I have submitted my request to see the minister of internal affairs when he makes his tour of this prison. I’ll give him an earful!

24 Nov. Why didn’t I think of this before? The guard’s words were, ‘No books, no papers, no pencils, no writing tablets.’ In my haste a few days ago I wrote something about Goldpork ‘not allowing reading’ – probably for brevity’s sake. I should have remembered the order. It was almost certainly Minute 345/67ZB in the Prisons Ordinance, Appendix D. I wrote that myself after we caught that Jew with his volume of reminiscences stuffed in his phylactery. And here I am giving Goldpork all the credit for it.

(later) The reason it all comes back to me is the typist. We worked late at the ministry that evening finishing up odds and ends of Party business. I was a stickler for detail, I wanted those minutes letter-perfect. I saw her slowing down, mumbling and erasing.

‘Dinner?’ I said, looking up from a foolscap file.

She turned away from her heavy black Yalor Office Console and flexed her fingers.

I snapped open my briefcase and handed her a sausage, a bit of bread, a cold potato. Gratefully she took them and, munching them, told me something about herself. I

don’t remember a word she said, but I recall thinking, ‘Yes, with a girl like that we have succeeded. Strong as a mule. Her tits are like turnips. She types a good rate and works like a dog. In the West she would be a frump at twenty.’

Nor was typing her only talent.

I begin to understand these handsome little striplings mincing through the night corridors of this dungeon.

27 Nov. Cement did very well, ten editions in a year. And Logs was to do even better. Those two secret policemen interrupted me halfway through Spindles. I wonder if they destroyed the fragment of manuscript I kept on my writing table? No, I don’t wonder at all. They did, of course they did. To do otherwise would have been a flagrant disregard of their orders. They had a duty to perform. Is it bourgeois of me to hope that before those pages were incinerated some soul read them and had doubts about my guilt?

30 Nov. Find this notebook, Goldpork! Here is one manuscript you won’t unearth. I write nearly every day, squatting on this bucket in your unclean stall. You would never think to look here! You have not discovered me, and until you reform this prison you never shall! I am noting this under your very nose! Pig! Dog!

2 Dec. The minister’s visit was brusquely announced for the first of December. I handed in my chit and said that I would like a word with him in private. ‘I know my rights,’ I said. I walked on eggshells all day, with the crumpled squares of the Memo to Gold-pork tucked into the elastic of my underpants. No minister. I waited all day today. No minister.

3 Dec. No minister.

4 Dec. No minister.

5 Dec. No minister.

6 Dec. What this country needs is a good solid overhaul by some merciless but farsighted Party man. When a minister announces a visit he has made a promise; this promise must be kept. The Memo to Goldpork of 17 Nov. is all but deteriorated in my underpants. I shall recopy it while waiting for the minister. I am not surprised Goldpork kept his job for so long. He would not last a minute in my charge.

7 Dec. No minister. I shall put the memo squares with the rest of this little diary. That minister is asking for a sacking.

8 Dec. ‘It was like battling with a pillow. Squeezed at one end it bulged at the other …’

(Cement, Ch. 10). I was writing of the landlords and moneylenders and the bullies in the ballroom. I could have been writing of my present difficulties.

Item: Enemies

Goldpork

The minister of internal affairs

Fatso, G's toad

The little chap who visited me several nights ago and played hard to get

9 Dec. The film version of Logs was praised and won a coveted medal. It opened with a panorama of a great banqueting hall. Fat men slobbering over pigs' trotters, ladies yelling, young men reaching into the bosoms of dowagers, dogs lapping up scraps. The camera moved to the cellar of the house: bearded old men reclining in coal piles, little boys whimpering. Back to the banqueting hall: fat men begin to dance with one another. Jigs and reels. 'Spin the floor!' cries one man (close shot of hairy face, hog jowls, food-flecked fangs). He stamps on the floor with his big boots. Cut below to cellar: old men and young boys putting on harnesses; they begin to tug and yank, little cattle on a threshing floor. Above, the people dance, the floor revolves gently; music plays. Fat men clutch their partners' bums. 'Faster! Faster!' they call; they stamp. Below, the proletariat get the message. They summon all their strength; they run on their harnesses: they are literally dancing. The old men become young, the young men strong. Above, the floor is spinning, revolving crazily, much too fast. The first fat man falls, then another. A dowager sprawls and spills her pearls. Skirts fly. The dancers are spun from the revolving floor by centrifugal force; some are knocked cold. Below, the workers strip off their harnesses and sing. A small boy makes a fist and raises his arm. Last shot: this dirty little fist.

I used to know what all this represented. I am not so sure now.

10 Dec. Clearly, the inner Party has gone soft. My analogy is the potato raked out of the coals too soon. Break open that crusty jacket, dig your fork into the soft mealy white … but wait! Grasp the potato with two hands and pinch it open: a cold hard center will be revealed. Burned on the outside, but cold and uncooked at the center … and that indigestible lump is enough to ruin the whole meal.

In our discussions, particularly at the Twentieth Plenum, we decided on and minuted the reverse of this. It was, so to say, the center of the potato we were certain was nourishing; we were not so sure of the rest.

Problem: Identify the potato's components, the fire, the tongs.

Who eats this potato?

There are rumors flying about. They say the minister has come and gone. But how could he? He hasn't seen me. He is fiddling his mileage claim, there is no doubt of that.

Ask yourself, Comrade Minister, which Party member penned the second Five-Year Plan? Yes, I wear manacles, but none of my chains weighs as heavily as this ingratitude.

11 Dec. Are there compensations here? Yes, I confess there are. Today, during our ten-minute fresh-air stroll we clanked as usual in a circle, reminding me of the painting by that insane Dutchman of a prison scene – blue convicts in a blue exercise yard – a painting, let me record, hanging in the Pushkin Museum in Moscow (who said the Russians are an insensitive people?). And one, then another and another of my fellow prisoners whispered hoarsely, 'That's him! There he is!' This continued ('That's him!') until the guard knocked one of the whisperers to the ground and told him to pipe down. But they continued to look at me with their gray faces. Several lifted their chains at me and shook them. It's nice to be recognized in a crowd.

14 Dec. At night now they scream my name.

15 Dec. They're still doing it. It gives me quite a lift.

16 Dec. Today I was set upon by six inmates and beaten. It was just after breakfast while we were emptying our chamberpots into the swill vat. The guards stand as far away as possible (the stink is overpowering) and these six, seeing their chance, gagged me with a mitten and knocked me insensible. I was not found until half-past ten. I was given broth and told to report to Goldpork. He recognized me immediately.

'Comrade Faust, we meet again.'

'Under less happy circumstances than before, Goldpork, I don't have to remind you.'

'Sit down, I want to have a word with you. What's this I hear about the stir you're causing in your cell-block?'

'They scream my name. I liked it at first, but today they beat me. They dug their fingers into my eyes and plucked at my neck and cheeks. I hated it.'

'And what do you conclude from this little affair?'

'Simple. They belong here. I don't. You know, Goldpork, we built this prison for them,

not for ourselves. It is they who should be munching on scraps and wiping the rims of their soiled chamberpots … not me. If only I had known!'

'You didn't deserve to be beaten, then? Don't you see that these men are relatives of all the people you liquidated?'

'I have one regret. I should have searched the houses more carefully. I might have turned up one or two of these oafs in cupboards and liquidated them as well.'

'And so you're trying to tell me you are a faithful Party member still?'

'I have committed no crime. I am not one of these comrades who runs shrieking into the arms of a Western publisher as soon as I am wronged, though I know I could live quite a nice little life if I did that. But I am not one of your backsliders. I was put in here, and here I will stay until the Party feels I have been punished enough. When I am set free I will work as always, with fervor.'

'It's pleasant to hear that, Comrade Faust. You bear us no ill will?'

'None at all.'

But I had. Though I only realized it after I went back to my cell and reread all the entries in this diary. I was dreadfully afraid. I held these scraps of paper up to the light and, as my name boomed through the corridors, I read with a sinking heart. I begin by saying I am innocent. I go on to complain about Goldpork and itemize ten objections to this prison. I slander the minister and the guard. I indulge in bourgeois nostalgia about my tenth-rate film. And as if this is not enough six days ago I describe the Inner Party as a lump of underdone potato.

Furthermore, and much worse, I withheld all of this from Gold-pork. I tried to pass myself off as a good Party member. But what is a good Party member doing in prison? I had said when I pocketed my Party card that I would serve. I am doing nothing of the sort. I am a complainer, like the chap on the commune who won't dig sugar beets because his mattock is bent. I should have told Gold-pork exactly where I stood. If I were honest I would hand over this diary. What earthly good is it? It represents nothing. Who would bother to read it except one of our magistrates or those Western publishers? It is an indulgence. I will write no more today.

17 Dec. Spent the whole day poking through my mattress looking for reactionary newspaper clippings to read. Found nothing. Knock on door. Fatso. Asked what pile of straw and oakum on floor might be. Told him to his face.

Note: Delete (g), (h) and (j) from Memo to Goldpork. These have apparently been remedied while I was busy with this diary. They know what they are doing. This is

further evidence that I am a scab. It was no trick. My guilt shows in every square I fill. After this knowledge, what forgiveness?

24 Dec. There is some satisfaction, when in prison, in knowing that one is guilty. The time passes quickly, one stops talking to oneself, one bears no grudges. I look forward to seeing Goldpork again and telling him everything, perhaps producing this diary from my shirtfront and letting it spill over his desk. They were right all along. My imagined innocence weighed on me and made me lax; but, guilty, I have a place – I belong. I see the logic of their decision to thump on my door with truncheons and drag me bootless from my flat. Today I sat and mused, humming a tune I once heard with Marushka when we secretly listened – as we did countless times! – to the broadcast of a foreign power. I am not Party material, and it is clear that Goldpork is. I shall see him tomorrow and cheerfully convey my guilt by wishing him a Merry Christmas.

Those were the last words Jack Faust was to write. He handed over his diary and freely confessed to all his crimes. They were mostly imaginary ones, but they contained such a wild note of threat that he was hanged before the new year. He was not mourned. I know this is true. My reward for extracting his confession from him – I did little more than listen to him and nod to the steno – was a very agreeable posting in Rome, attached to our Embassy; my job was to round up people who had fled the country and were seeking asylum in Italy. I got to know the ins and outs of fleeing, and I was helped in my searches by Marushka, whose full name and address I had found scratched on the wall of Jack's cell. In our six months in Rome we drugged many an escapee and posted each back to the capital in a mailbag. Only Marushka could have been expected to mourn Jack Faust, yet when I asked her she denied all knowledge of him. I could only smile.

And smiling one night I said I was stepping out for a breath of fresh air. I did so and never returned. The morning I left Italy (this was in Milan) I thought I saw Marushka whiz past me, straddling the back of a Vespa and clutching the Italian driver with one hand and what I believe was the manuscript of Jack's unfinished novel (Spindles) with the other. But I may be wrong; many Italian girls had Marushka's knees, and all girls jounce the same on a scooter: I love to see their rolling bottoms and hear the seat springs oink! In any case, Marushka is doing all right for herself. I am pretty sure she pinched Spindles from Jack's flat; I know I never discovered what happened to it. The police were no help. I have a feeling that one of these days I'm going to see it in translation on the revolving paperback bookstand at my corner drugstore.

During our last conversation Jack had a moment of panic. He saw the toilet roll of his whole incriminating diary spread out on my desk and said, 'Wait, Goldpork, I'll make a deal with you!' I flapped my hand and brushed aside the terms he was stammering at me. I said, 'But don't you see you've already made one?' Then the guards appeared and led him away. I had not finished speaking. I wanted to say that we all make deals. It is a pity he did not live long enough to see that mine at least had a reasonably happy

ending.