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RUSSIAN CONVICTS IN AUSTRALIA

On 22 July 1816 the *Atlas*, yet another English transport ship carrying convicts, entered Sydney Harbour. Among the new arrivals one man stood out, keeping to himself — a tall, dark-haired, brown-eyed man with a pale, haggard face, blind in one eye. The roll call began. "Constantine... Mil-cow!" the Sydney overseer receiving the human cargo called out haltingly. And Konstantin, who had long since given up trying to explain that his surname was actually Milkov, confirmed as usual that he was Milcow, a native of Moscow, aged 33, a horse-breaker by trade, convicted in London on 10 May 1815 for theft and transported to Australia for seven years.

On 26 April 1815, Konstantin Milkov, wandering about the London docks, stole 17 pounds of bacon from a shop in Wapping Wall. He was caught red-handed by the shopman John Watkinson and taken to the police. The trial soon followed, and the final verdict was handed down: "Guilty of stealing seventeen pounds weight of bacon, value 11 s. Transported for Seven Years."

This is all the reliable information that can be gleaned from the court records concerning the misadventures of Konstantin Milkov in London back in 1815. How he came to be in London remains unknown. Perhaps he was a runaway sailor looking for a berth on a new voyage, or perhaps simply an adventurer. It is quite possible that he was a Russian soldier who found himself in Europe after the war with Napoleon. There were many such men at the time; the Russian writer Goncharov described meeting one of them in South Africa in his book *The Frigate Pallada*. Only one thing can be said with certainty: Milkov was not a professional London thief, and his theft was most likely an act of desperation. His entire subsequent life, spent in honest, hard labour, confirms this.

Initially Milkov was sent to Bringelly, in the Liverpool district of Australia; settlement of that territory had only just begun at the time. The farmers would not take him into their service, and so he suffered the harder lot of a "government" convict. Milkov served his full sentence, working in the environs of Sydney. Evidently he incurred no penalties, for in 1822, upon completion of his term, he received full freedom and settled in Windsor, a small town east of Sydney. Here he leased a farm of five and a quarter acres. It was impossible to live off this plot, and Milkov entered the service of a prominent local landowner, Archibald Bell (1773–1837), who at that time held the office of chief police magistrate of the district. In 1823 Milkov was still in Bell's service, but the census of 1825 finds him working as a hired labourer for the Macarthurs in Argyle. The name and surname of Konstantin Milkov (or Melkov), so unfamiliar to the English ear, took root with difficulty on Australian soil — in the records he appears as Constantine Milcow, Meliko, Meleke and even Constantia Millers. The last traces of Milkov that could be discovered date from 1825. He does not appear in the census of 1828 or in later ones; he is absent from the databases of New South Wales pioneers among those who died, married or became fathers, nor is he among those who left Australia. Indeed, he could hardly have had enough money to leave Australia, and most likely his forgotten grave lies lost forever somewhere in the Australian bush.

Evidently Milkov may be considered the first Russian convict in Australia, and most likely the first permanent Russian resident of Australia as well — but by no means the first arrival from the Russian Empire.

The pre-Australian life of John Potocki (1762–1824) is likewise shrouded in mystery. A native of Belarus, he knew the Russian language and had served, by his own account, in the Russian army. He was arrested in England, transported to the colonies, and arrived in Tasmania with the first Tasmanian fleet in 1804; at that time the island, lying south of the Australian mainland, was known as Van Diemen's Land. When the Russian ships *Kreiser* and *Ladoga* called at Hobart in May 1823, the sailors were astonished to discover four people who knew Russian. One of them was a convict known by the name John Poteski. In the manuscript of his book, the famous Russian navigator Captain Andrei Lazarev wrote of this as follows:

In Hobart we saw four people who knew the Russian language, among them an elderly native of Belarus named Potocki; if his words are to be believed, in the reign of Empress Catherine II he was an officer in our army, and by the fortunes of fickle fate was carried to England, whence in 1804 he was sent to Van Diemen's Island among the criminals; since 1810 he has enjoyed his freedom, has a house in the town, a wife and grown children... Before our departure we sent Potocki a copy of the New Testament in Russian...

Potocki was presumably born around 1762–63. It is known that after the second partition of Poland in 1793, a national liberation uprising of the Poles began under the leadership of Tadeusz Kościuszko, supported by many members of the noble Potocki family. It is quite likely that John Potocki deserted from the Russian army and joined the insurgents, and after the defeat of the uprising, like many others, fled abroad. In England Potocki married an Irishwoman around 1800, and they had son Joseph. In the winter of 1801 Potocki committed a petty theft in the town of Newhaven (Sussex), and at the beginning of 1802 he was sentenced to seven years' transportation. In Australia three daughters were born into the Potocki family. In 1810 Potocki was freed and became an independent farmer. According to contemporaries, he successfully supplied the young colony with his produce; in 1816, for example, he alone grew more wheat than the colonial authorities required for the annual government store. Yet many storms and misfortunes still awaited the Potocki family. In 1821 his son Joseph was executed for robbery. Potocki himself, in the last years of his life, was caught stealing sheep. He died in 1824... His surname had several spellings in Australia (for example, Potaski, Potasky, Poteskie). Remarkably, the Potocki descendants today number about two thousand people. These people still hold regular family reunions. On their initiative, in the centre of Hobart, in the memorial park dedicated to the founders of the colony, a small metal plaque has been mounted on the wall beside the surviving gravestones of the first settlers, bearing the inscription: "John Poteski. Arrived Hobart 18-2-1804. Died 31-8-1824."

Among the natives of Russia transported to Australia there was another enigmatic figure — Joseph Aurora. Although he named Russia as his place of birth, his ethnic origin remains unclear. One might suppose that Joseph was a Pole, but Polish convicts as a rule declared themselves natives of Poland, not Russia, and in appearance he did not resemble a Pole — black hair, dark brown eyes, swarthy skin. His very surname, Aurora, which belongs to neither the Slavic nor any other European language, also raises doubts. Evidently it was a pseudonym or nickname. Joseph was born around 1770. He gave his occupation as sailor. On 5 August 1812 he was arrested in London for the theft of a pair of stockings worth 14 shillings. Unlike Konstantin Milkov, Aurora, it seems, was by no means a stranger to the London criminal world. When he was caught, according to the policeman, he "burst into a dreadful volley of oaths and threatened to knock me down." Evidently the policeman convinced the court of the malicious nature of the arrested man, for Aurora was sentenced to death (Milkov's seven-year term seems not so severe by comparison). He was saved only by being recognised as "a foreigner unacquainted with the laws" of England. He was pardoned, his death sentence commuted to

transportation to Australia for life. He arrived in Sydney on the ship *Earl Spencer* on 9 October 1813. But there all trace of him is lost. Either he changed his surname once again, or he died, or he escaped...

Curious, too, is the fate of another convict with a Dutch name, Abraham Van Brienens, born in Arkhangelsk around 1789, a Protestant and a merchant by trade. He was a gentleman, well educated, fluent in English, German and French. Living in London, he was arrested and sentenced to seven years' transportation, arriving in Sydney on the ship *Agamemnon* on 22 September 1820. That same day he sent Governor Macquarie a letter, presumably a petition for mitigation of his lot, enclosing a letter of recommendation from Count Lieven, the Russian ambassador in London, who wrote that in Russia the Van Brienens family belonged to "respected high society" and that Brienens himself enjoyed "an unblemished reputation and access to high society." At first this did not help, and Brienens was sent to labour at Emu Plains, then dispatched to Port Dalrymple in northern Tasmania. Finally, in 1822, he managed to obtain a position as a clerk in the Parramatta commissariat (his handwriting was indeed excellent). Soon he petitioned the new governor, Thomas Brisbane, for early release (in superb French), again enclosing a copy of the Russian ambassador's letter. Over these years Brienens several times attracted the attention of the authorities, now with unfounded denunciations of his superiors, now by absconding from his place of work, but everything somehow blew over — educated men were valued in the colony. In 1823 Brienens was enjoying a comfortable life in Sydney, working as a clerk and moving in local society. At the end of 1823, however, he was arrested for dealings with a forged cheque and confined in Sydney Gaol, then banished for the remainder of his sentence to Port Macquarie, a penal settlement for reoffenders. Having served his sentence, Brienens managed to return to England in 1828. But there he was again arrested for forging documents and, sentenced to transportation for life, found himself in Australia once more, arriving on the ship *Surry* in 1834. Now he went by the name Alexander Brannon. He was only 45, but he looked a worn-out old man — grey-haired, almost bald, missing half his teeth. It is known that he worked on Goat Island in Port Jackson. He apparently did not live long.

Among the convicts who named Russia as their place of birth were several more people of non-Russian origin. Abraham Samuels, a Jew born in Russia around 1795, was a pedlar. Having moved to England, he settled in Manchester, where he had a wife and four children. In 1826 he was arrested for receiving stolen goods and transported to Australia for 14 years; he arrived in Sydney on the ship *Manlius* on 11 August 1827 and worked at Penrith for Samuel Dow. He later became a blacksmith, and then a constable. He was conditionally pardoned in 1841 and died in 1846.

John Johnson, a woodcutter born in Arkhangelsk around 1783, was sentenced in England in 1816 to seven years' transportation for a stolen hat, and arrived in Sydney on 7 November 1818 on the ship *Morley*. After serving his sentence he was arrested for a new offence and banished to Port Macquarie.

Western Australia was the last colony to receive convicts, and natives of Russia deported from England in the later years were sent there. Among them was another interesting figure — Frionurg Badoski. He was born in Russia in 1827 and belonged to the Greek Church, that is, he was Orthodox and, despite his strange name, may have been Russian or Polish. His appearance was of a Slavic or Finnish type — of medium height, round-faced, blue-eyed, with dark fair hair. Badoski was literate, and by occupation a soldier and... a diamond cutter. In 1853 he was tried in England for forging a banknote and transported to Western Australia for 14 years. He arrived in Perth on the ship *Ramillies* on 7 August 1854. For several years he was

kept in custody. In the prison register of convicts' punishments, the notation B&W appears several times against his name — this evidently means that for bad behaviour he was put on bread and water. But eventually his life began to improve. After three years he received his ticket of leave, and two years later a conditional pardon, and he successfully took up the trade of jeweller and watchmaker. In 1861 he married Margaret Campbell; by this time he was known by the name Francis. But then he was caught once more with a forged banknote and sentenced to three years. Now Badoski had to work at Champion Bay as a labourer and coal-carrier. In 1864 his second sentence ended, he received full freedom, and at the beginning of 1866 he departed for Batavia.

Among the convicts were several men from the Baltic provinces of Russia. Nisson (or Nissen) Jacobson was born around 1794 in Liepāja (Libau), in Latvia, then part of the Russian Empire. Ethnically he was most likely a Scandinavian or a Latvian. He gave his occupation as "cigar maker." Arrested in London in 1817 for possession of a forged banknote and sentenced to 14 years' transportation, he arrived in Tasmania on 11 June 1818 on the ship *Lady Castlereagh*. He may have been one of those Russian-speaking people whom Captain Lazarev met in Hobart in 1823 besides Potocki, but did not name. Here Jacobson served Mrs Humphrey, and for insolence towards her his case was even heard before the magistrate. No other offences were recorded against him, and in 1826 he was conditionally pardoned, and in 1831 fully freed.

Aaron Woolf, a Jew, was born in Riga in 1793. He moved to England, traded, was arrested for the theft of 14 (!) gold watches and sentenced to a mere seven years' transportation. He arrived in Australia in 1829 on the ship *Lighton* and worked in Goulburn for George Barber. Woolf was a rebellious man, for which he was once sentenced to a cruel punishment — 75 lashes. Having served his sentence, he himself entered the service of the prison system, and at the end of his life moved to Tasmania.

Carl Plumbach, a native of Memel (now Klaipėda, Lithuania), served as a ship's carpenter. While in port in London he committed a crime and received transportation to Australia for life, arriving on the ship *Funny* in 1816.

Ernst Elsnor, another native of Lithuania, worked in London as a bookbinder. For two stolen shirts he received seven years' transportation and arrived in Hobart on the ship *John* in 1833.

Peter Myers, a sailor and native of Finland, shared the fate of Carl Plumbach — while in port in London he committed an offence, received seven years' transportation and arrived in Sydney on the ship *Elizabeth* in 1816.

A numerous group among the convicts — 18 people — consisted of natives of that part of Poland which formed part of the Russian Empire, as well as of persons who did not specify in which part of Poland they were born. Only six of them can confidently be called Poles: Joseph Botegelfsky (arrested in Spain, transported to Australia in 1815); the Varsovians August Piotrowski and Kazimierz Szezygielski, formerly in the service of an English gentleman and co-defendants in a case of receiving stolen goods (1838); the soldier Joseph Skewski (1838); and Norbruth Dolubowski, a Varsovian, former servant and soldier (1838). The sixth, a soldier from Poland named Paul Stempin, was arrested in Spain in 1813 together with another soldier, from Wallachia, named Theodore Herenzack (this appears to be a corrupted surname, possibly Slavic). They received transportation for life, arrived in Australia in 1814 and became servants of the famous explorer of Australia John Oxley, later receiving conditional release. Oxley spoke of Stempin as "an industrious, worthy man." Another Catholic from Warsaw, Joseph Yoncasty (1840), a tailor and soldier, may, judging by his surname, have been a Czech or a Slovak. Nine were Jews (Joachim Boaz, Aaron Gainsborough, Thomas Harris/Herscht, Samuel

Jacobs, Moses King, Jacob Levy, Moses Rochotz, Wolfe Tielzner, Simon Wineberg). Two more Varsovians — Gothan (Gotthard) Raake, a "professor of languages," and Mathias Tody (or Yody), a sutler — evidently belonged ethnically to other European peoples.

Speaking of people with Slavic surnames, one more mysterious figure must be mentioned — in 1838 a 17-year-old named Daniel Detloff/Von Ranzow was transported to Australia from Prince of Wales Island. The surname was written in the German manner, but it can also be read as Daniil Detlov (Dyatlov?)/Vorontsov. Who was he? There are several Prince of Wales Islands in different parts of the world. In all likelihood, Detlov was a native of the island of that name in the Alexander Archipelago off the coast of Alaska, in former Russian America. Around this island there is a multitude of Russian place names — Kutuzov Island, Baranov Island, on which stood Novo-Arkhangelsk (Sitka), and even the settlement of Petersburg. He was probably a Russified Tlingit Indian. His appearance was clearly non-European — yellow skin, black hair, dark brown eyes. It is known that Detlov was literate, served as a ship's mate, was arrested for attempted murder, convicted in a court in Bombay and sentenced to transportation to Australia for life. In 1841 he received conditional release.

Thus, over the period 1804–1862, 31 people from territories forming part of the Russian Empire were transported to Australia (with the proviso that this figure is not final, and further research may reveal other compatriots of ours among the convicts). Of these, only three were born in Russian cities proper — Moscow and Arkhangelsk. Another four, naming Russia as their place of birth, did not specify from which part of it they came. Two were born in Latvia, one in Lithuania, one in Finland, one in Russian America. And finally, 18 named Poland as their place of birth. John Potocki, whose place of birth is not recorded in the documents, was, according to his own words, a native of Belarus. The ethnic origin of these convicts presents an even more complex picture. The only one who can reliably be identified as Russian was Konstantin Milkov of Moscow. John Potocki was a Belarusian or a Pole. Six men from Poland were undoubtedly Poles. Two more who named Russia as their homeland (Joseph Aurora and Frionurg Badoski) may possibly have been Poles. One was presumably a Czech or a Slovak. At least 11 were Jews (one from Russia, one from Latvia, nine from Poland). Finally, there was even an American Indian. At the same time, there remain no fewer than 8 people who, judging by their names and surnames, may be considered Englishmen, Dutchmen and Scandinavians (Abraham Van Brien, John Johnson, George Moneylaws, Nisson Jacobson, Ernst Elsnor, Peter Myers, Gothan Raake, Mathias Tody). This demonstrates once again that at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Russia was truly a European power, a substantial part of whose population consisted of foreigners, especially on its periphery, in the port cities. Abraham Van Brien himself, a native of Arkhangelsk, with an excellent command of three European languages and enjoying the patronage of the Russian ambassador in London, though he bore a Dutch name, evidently belonged to the Russian elite.

In present-day Australia it is customary to take pride in convict ancestors. These sentiments are briefly expressed in the slogan "Proud of my convict blood!" Well then — those natives of the Russian Empire, the USSR and Russia now living in Australia can say with pride that their compatriots, too, stood at the very origins of the Australian nation.

E. Govor. Sudba prevratnogo schastiia, ili taina Dzhona Pototskogo. - *Avstraliada*, Sydney, 1996, No. 7.

E. Govor. Russkii, gollandets, indeets-tlinkit (k istorii ssyl'nykh rossiian v Avstralii). - *Avstraliada*, Sydney, 2000, No. 22.

P.S. A number of facts in these publications need to be clarified and supplemented on the basis of newly available materials, which will be done in due course. – Elena Govor, July 2026.