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The Toy Trucks

The “Krasnoyarskiy Rabochiy” (Krasnoyarsk Worker) newspaper, July 15, 2004

In the April 29 issue, in the report “A Tractor Got Arrested In the Field”, we wrote about local court marshals confiscating the property in lieu of debts owed by the Shushenskiy district agricultural producers. We wrote about the dashing and “profitable” (for whom we wonder?) ways used by some local municipal outfit, called “The Trading House”, which acts as an attorney-in-fact for the Federal Property Fund of the Russian Federation, to dispose of the confiscated property.

But if what we have described there could be viewed by some as a comedy of morals, the story that began on June 15 in the central town of the Shushenskiy district is nothing short of a tragic farce. Or some would describe it as *bespredel*¹.

Director of the auto service and transportation company “Shushenskoe”, Nikolai Panasenko, who still cannot get over the experience and speaks agitatedly, in angry voice, recalls: “That day we got visited by the court marshal together with a representative of “The Trading House”, Ponedelnik was his name. Straight off, literally before they even came in, they said, ‘We are taking your vehicles in lieu of your debts. And they have been sold already, anyway’. At the same time, to confirm their words, other men began waving some cash receipts in our faces.” And that was the only papers they had, or at least had shown to Panasenko. No inventory of the attached property, no paperwork for taking custody of the seized items. Nothing!

“Imagine”, says Panasenko, “people in uniform coming to your apartment and telling you: we have already sold your TV set, and the furniture too. I would not deny it, we are in debt. A marshal had visited us once before to attach our real estate property, but there was never any talk of confiscating out vehicles. We are far from bankruptcy yet, but in one day 10 people lost their jobs, and the company now is as good as dead...”

¹ A recent addition to Russian, literally “a no limits situation or behavior”, meaning, among other things, utter lawlessness and arbitrariness.

Panasenko did try to stop the unlawful confiscation, but the representatives of law and order, and the municipal businessman broke the garage locks and drove away three KamAZ² trailer trucks, together with trailers, and a “Moskvich” sedan. The fourth KamAZ, a fuel truck, as transpired later, the “law enforcers” tracked down in Kuraginskiy district, on a fuel delivery route. They followed the truck to its fuel discharge destination, let the drivers empty the tank, and then just pushed him out of the cabin, and then reportedly handcuffed him for good measure. As to Panasenko, he is now getting summons to the justice of peace. They want to charge him with the administrative violation of interfering with the king’s men while they were “carrying out their official duties”. By interfering they mean that he was shouting and swearing, and for that he faces a fine of up to 10 minimal monthly wages³.

The distraint order came by mail, a week after the seizure. It is a peculiar document dated May 20. The first page is a form page, but the following are ordinary writing paper filled with hurried handwriting. But the most interesting part is the official property appraisal list dated by June. The four trailer trucks are assessed at 21, 23, 24, and 26 thousand rubles. As to the trailers, they are simply dirt cheap: 13, 12, and 9 thousand rubles.

The impression one gets is that they were assessing toy trucks, not the real ones, because, as any transportation specialist would tell you, the realistic market price for a powerful trailer truck, in good conditions, the one that is daily put on the road, is more than 100 thousand rubles. Trailers go for half as much. Incidentally, the “Moskvich” sedan, though assessed at 10 thousand, the marshals managed to sell through “The Trading House” for astonishing one thousand and a half (*about \$50*). As was claimed in the distraint order, the car was missing the engine.

“This is a bloody lie”, protests Panasenko, “we were driving the car till the day it was seized.” Perhaps they did, but they also, according to a court decision, owed the Federal Pension Fund. Though not much, just some 115 thousands rubles, which could have been covered by a single KamAZ truck. But even that would not have been necessary, since the marshals have already attached the one hundred car garage. The garage alone would have sufficed, had it not been assessed at the ridiculous 90 thousands rubles. Director Panasenko have found many willing to pay much more than that, but the uniformed powers-that-be told him not to meddle, for it was for them to find the buyer.

Not long before the KamAZs’ seizure incident, one of them told Nikolay Panasenko, “Sell me this car, I want it for my son” .

“Suppose I sell it, what then I will be left with to use?”

² Produced by the Kama Automotive Plant located in Tatarstan, an autonomous republic within the Russian Federation.

³ Currently, in Russia, amount of fines is often measured in minimal monthly wages decreed by the government.

As it has turned out, this was an ill-advised answer. He refused to sell one car and lost his whole fleet in a twinkling.

The auto service and transportation company “Shushenskoe” is, of course, heavily in debt, but it is not bankrupt yet, and it falls into the category of agricultural enterprises, because it serves the agricultural sector by transporting fuel, seeds, etc.. Therefore, it is protected by law and is entitled to debts restructuring. But guess what happened when Panasenko obtained papers to this effect from the tax authorities and showed them to the marshals? Right. They told him to do with the papers you know what.

The company is certain it was a made to order seizure: somebody needed trucks cheap and in a hurry. In this connection, one cannot help but wonder about the role and functions of the representative of the provincial division of the Federal Property Fund. Never in recent memory had this representative, the municipally owned “The Trading House”, sold any property for higher than the assessment price. For the period from March to May, the property seized in Kurganinskiy, Ermakovskiy, and Idrinskiy districts was sold for the total that was 26 000 rubles less than the assessed price of this property. One wonders how the company staff makes their living, if they working so ardously to sell at a loss.

And what is completely incomprehensible: why it is that the local authorities are shutting their eyes on the situation? In the last three – four years, sizable chunks of property of the formerly flourishing agricultural enterprises in the villages of Subbotino and Kapyrevo were sold for peanuts, the granary in Siniy Kamen was shut down. On the whole, agricultural sector in Shushenskiy district, formerly one of the best in the region, is in a deep, prolonged crisis; hundreds of peasants lost their jobs.

From all the food processing plants in the district, the only one that is increasing the volume of production is a distillery, “Shushenskiy Brand”. Possibly, very soon it will be the enterprise that defines the image of the district. Meanwhile, the municipal officials are obsessed with the idea to make Shushenskoe a major tourist attraction⁴: they organize conferences, they sing and dance, and try to impress the rare visitors with what remains of deteriorating infrastructure built in the Soviet times, in the “period of stagnation”. But they cannot, for years, repair the main building of the central district hospital.

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[TO THE CONTENT PAGE](#)

⁴ Shushenskoe, a place some 500 miles south of Krasnoyarsk, in Eastern Siberia, used to be possibly the best known village in the whole of Siberia. Every Soviet citizen was supposed to know that there Vladimir Lenin had spent 3 years in internal exile, in 1890es. Also boasts an open air museum and a historic village created in 1970.