

A GULAG: THE WHITE SEA CANAL

A Photo Essay

by

Donald N. Miller

Ever since I was a little boy I heard about the Baltic-White Sea Canal. My uncle Heinrich M. Muller was sentenced to a *Gulag* there in May 1934. Over the years I learned bits and pieces about the canal from various books and articles, and from Sofie Schmalz, Heinrich's adopted daughter. But my greatest discovery was made in the State Archives in Zhitomir while working on my book, *Under Arrest*, and in a personal visit I made to the canal with my wife Nancy in June 2004.



Heinrich and Berta Muller and their adopted daughter, Sophie

What I learned is that the construction of the canal was begun in November 1931. The plan, largely at the insistence of Stalin, was to build a 227 km long (141 miles), 37 km out of solid rock and the remaining 188 km consisting of dammed-up lakes and flooded riverbeds, linking the White Sea to the Baltic Sea. The purpose was to connect the two seas enabling ships carrying timber and minerals from the White Sea to the commercial ports of the Baltic without making the 370-mile journey through the Arctic Ocean, and to provide military access to the area in event of war. It was an old idea, first proposed by trade merchants in the 16th C.

During the 20 months it took to build the canal, the number of workers reached in excess of 300,000 at its peak. Of these, over 100,000 were devoured by the fierce winters, abysmal living conditions and stringent labor requirements, although some historians put the number of deaths at a substantially higher figure. There are 19 locks, 49 weirs and 15 dams. In all, there are over 100 hydraulic engineering structures. In July 1933, when the canal was completed, Stalin took an excursion on a steamer to inspect the canal. It is reported that he sat on deck smoking and laughing with his aids, completely oblivious to the fact that the canal was too shallow to be of much use.

One could easily describe Stalin's massive effort in a lengthy article. Whole books have in fact been written about it. But I have decided instead to let the pictures, with their brief cut lines, speak for themselves. If it is true that one picture is worth a thousands words, then this constitutes more than a 50,000 essay.



Our journey began on Thursday evening, June 10, 2004 with an overnight train ride from St. Petersburg to Petrozavodsk to see first-hand the canal where my uncle worked on the maintenance crew.



I woke up at 5:30 in the morning and took a number of shots of the modest houses along the railroad tracks. It was almost 70 years to the day that my uncle road that very same railroad to the notorious Gulag. I wondered what went through his mind. Our train arrived in Petrozavodsk at 7:15 in the morning.



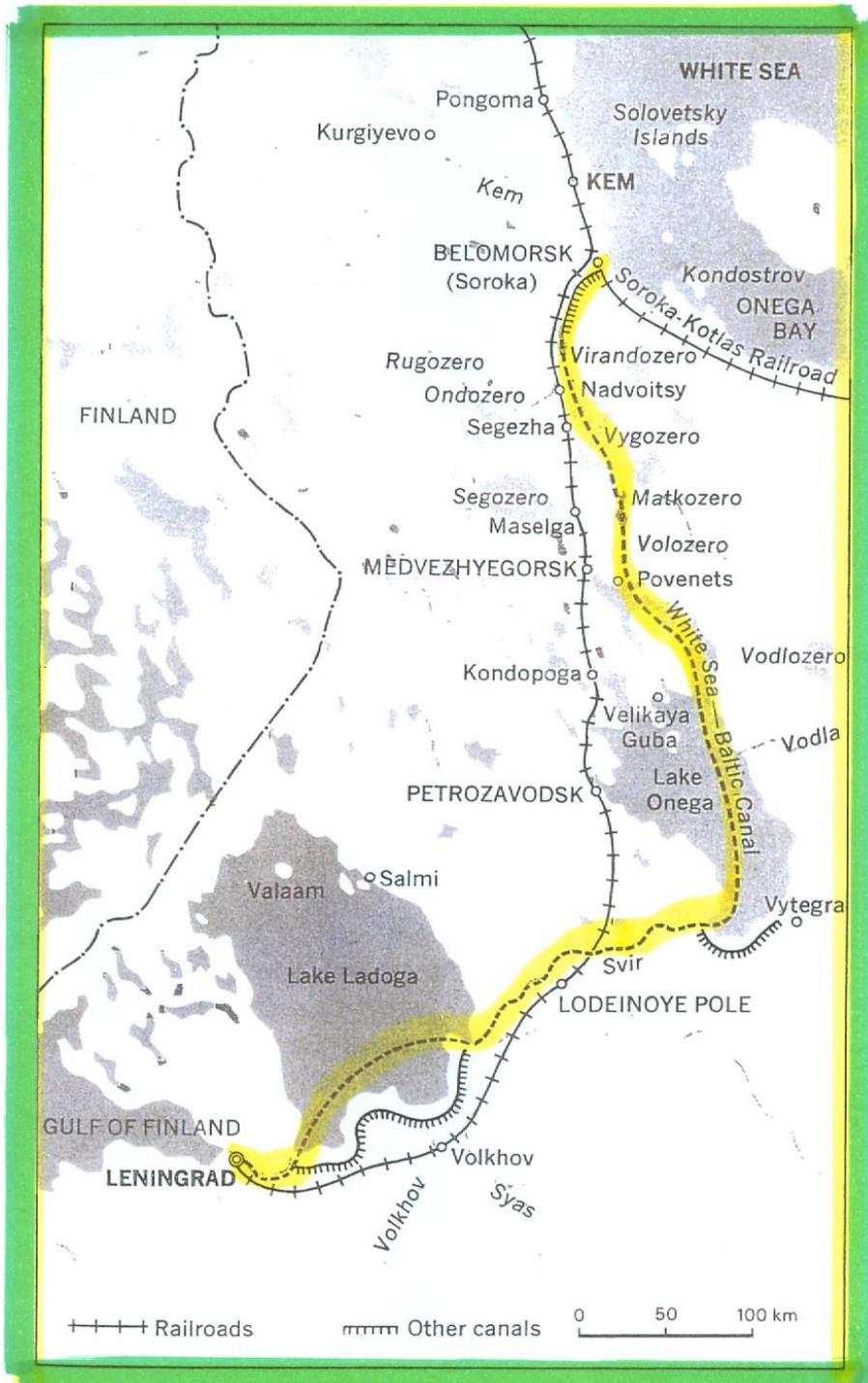
We were met by the local archivist and self-styled guide, Yuri Dmitriev of Petrozavodsk. Several years earlier he had guided the well-known journalist and author of *Gulag*, Anne Applebaum, along the same canal route, and came highly recommended. At several points along the canal he ceremoniously got out his pack of *Belomor* cigarettes and smoked a joint. As he did so, he explained that the Belomor cigarette, once one of the Soviet's most popular brands of cigarettes, was for decades the only monument to the canal builders.



Yuri runs the local chapter of memorial and a small museum in Petrozavodsk. He has also published his own version of the Baltic-White Sea Canal, serves as a guide to the canal and assist people in accessing the NKVD files of the exiles to Karelia.



The crowded museum is filled with unique pictures, books and articles. It also preserves many of the prisoner's belongings, such as, buttons, coins, combs, toothbrushes, pipes, wallets, eyeglasses, belts, tools and shoes, as well as sand, soil, stones and spent bullets found at the various sites. The air hangs heavy with sadness. The Gulag is a terrible chapter in Russia's history. Why? That is a question everyone asks.



Map of the White Sea-Baltic Canal or BBK, as it is popularly called.



Our first glimpse of the canal route was at Povenets, the best place to get a close-up view, unless you want to drive or take the train all the way up to Belomorsk, Station 19. To assist us in bridging the language barrier, we were accompanied by Yaroslav Yatsky, a Ukrainian from Koreston, living in St. Petersburg.



Before going to the lock at Povnets, I picked up a few stones as souvenirs along the banks of the canal.



At the canal in Provenets we saw a few buildings in the distance (facing north) and a small booth occupied by a man controlling the rise and fall of the water.



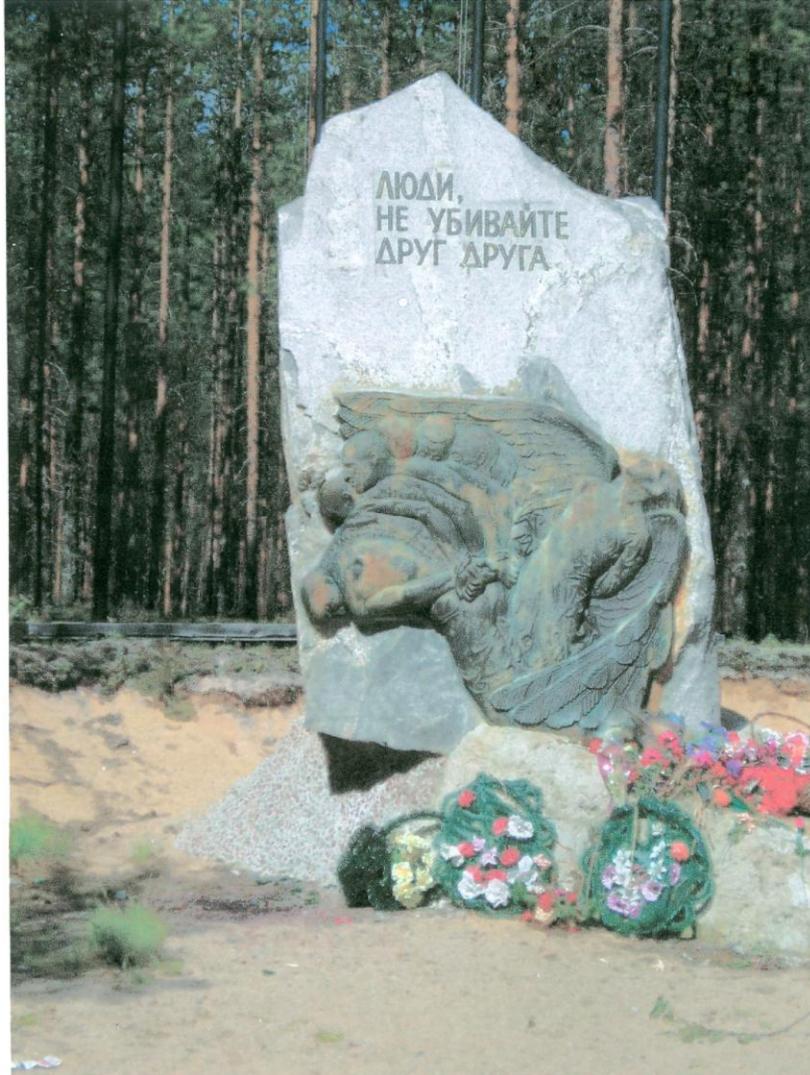
Fortunately we were just in time to see a small barge, one of five or six a day, to make its way through the lock. It seemed to be carrying firewood. Most goods nowadays travel by rail, as the canal is virtually useless.



Nearby stood an old *trudposelok*, or “exile settlement house” now virtually empty. The large houses, made of wood in typical Karelian style, were boarded up. Several had begun to sag. Yuri told us that this was the administrator’s house.



Next to it was the administrative building. A local man, who was working around the building, became upset when I got out of the van and took a picture of the former Communist office. When Yuri explained to him who we were and what we were about, he calmed down.



After a brief ride in our rented van we found ourselves in a nearby forest. At the entrance was a stone-carved monument in honor of the “innocents” who had died while building the canal. After I got home and examined the photo more carefully, I noticed that the prisoners were depicted as having found refuge under “the Shadow of the Almighty,” a ministering angel with outstretched wings.



As we made our way into the forest, we were met by a group of men and women, who had just visited one of the many mass graves uncovered by Yuri and his associates in the area.



Here we were shown shallow indentations in the ground and mounds of dirt where thousands of skeletal remains have been uncovered. Many of the personal belongings now housed in the museum were found at these sites.

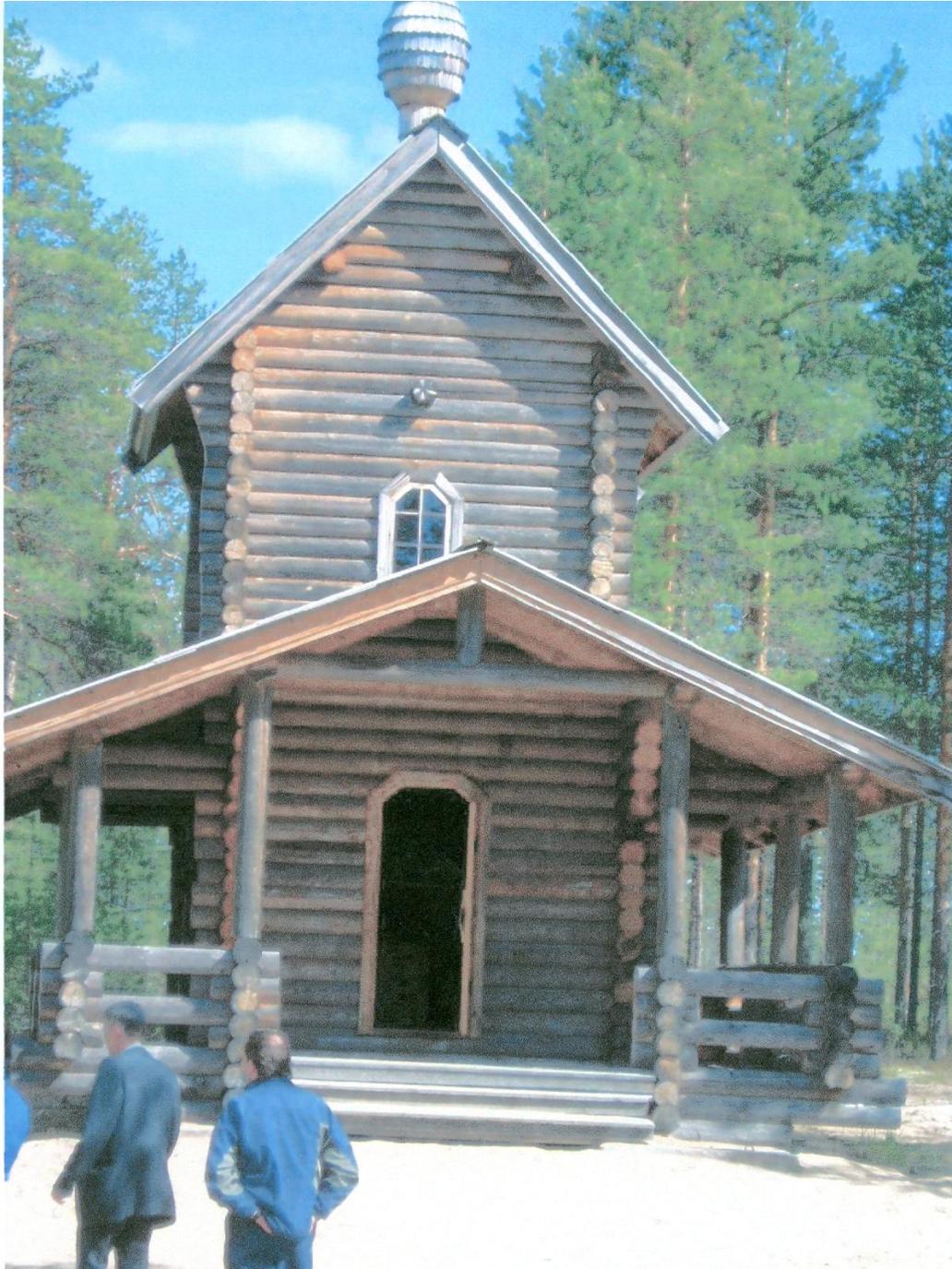


Later, at his house, Yuri gave me a picture he had taken of a pile of skulls he

had unearthed. Each skull had a single bullet hole in the back of the head. When Yuri reported his findings to the local authorities, they showed little interest in the remains. "If you want to rebury the," they said, "go ahead." To date Yuri and his team of volunteers have uncovered 360 mass graves along the canal.



Throughout the woods family members had erected little memorials in memory of their loved ones, some with pictures of the prisoners.



There was also a little chapel in the woods with a guest registry. I signed my name in memory of Heinrich. M. Muller.



From Provenets our guide took us to Medvezhegorsk, once the gateway to the canal and the capital of the area. It was here that the prisoners, upon their arrival, received their working orders. Today the building is a museum.



The old rusted lanterns, tin eating utensils and iron and wood working tools on display, are a grim reminder of the terrible days the prisoners spent there.



A high wooden fence near the museum is all that remains of a once notorious prison camp. Once there was a watchtower at each corner of the Gulag, which made it virtually impossible for a prisoner to escape. The few prisoners who tried were shot on the spot or tracked down within minutes by dogs specially trained for that purpose.

At this point we returned to Petrozavodsk and joined Yuri at his home where he shared a disc with many of the following photos on it.



Prisoners on their way from the Murmansk RR station to the transit camp located at Kem.



Prisoners trudging through the forest to their assigned work camp



When the first prisoners arrived in 1931, there was nothing but trees. Before construction could begin, they first had to build their own wooden barracks.



Fortunately some of the prisoners had the use of horses to haul the timber out of the nearby forest. Others dragged the wood out by hand.



It took time to cut the timber into logs. In the meantime, the cold freezing Karelian winter sometimes killed the men before they completed their tasks.



As new campsites were built along the canal, new housing also had to be erected, which meant that more logs had to be cut and hauled out.



The large, barren barracks were almost always freezing cold, even though a fire burned in the stoves day and night, thanks to the fact that there was plenty of firewood in Karelia. Snow often nearly covered the hastily constructed housing.



The canal required the digging of a sloping trench 12 feet deep at the center and 141 miles long, much of it through heavy swampland and sheer granite.



Everything had to be done by hand. There were no hydraulic tools or lifts. The prisoners themselves forged special tools made to ease the work. Even then they were little more than pieces of scrap metal. Saws, for example, consisted of mere flat metal sheets, with teeth crudely cut into them.



One inmate said, "We dug the earth by hand and carried it out by wheelbarrows."



Sometimes prisoners had the luxury of horses to help drag the heavy stones out of the way.



The prisoners worked year round from early morning to late at night in the freezing snow.



Instead of dynamite, prisoners broke up the large boulders using hammers and iron rods. Inset: Naftaly Frenkel



Naftaly Frenkel, (extreme right) was the commander-in-chief of the project. He worked with a team of supervisors.



Prisoners often had to light bonfires to thaw the frozen ground.



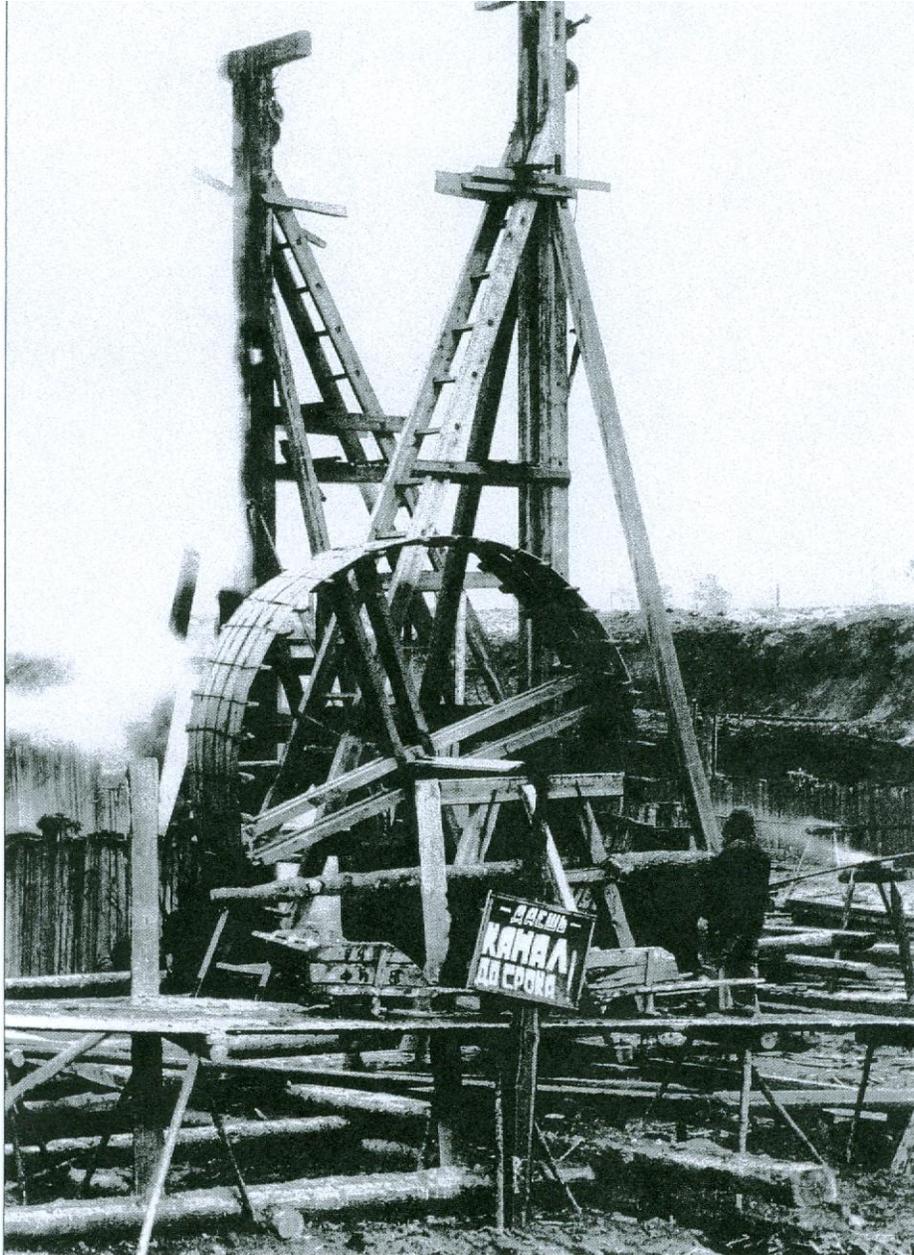
Prisoners also had to heat mortar to help it bond in freezing weather.



Prisoners enjoying a few moments of rest during a meal break.



The route was divided into nine sections. Everywhere there were platforms, scaffolding, wooden derricks, nets, ropes, pulleys and hoists to make the work easier.



Primitive pile drivers operated by sheer muscle power at prisoners walking inside a wooden four-man wheel.



735,4-28 апреля 1932 г.
Вывозка тачками к плавунам в верхней
голове плеса № 3 ударниками Сусли-
ковым и Ключником Лактюкиным.

The task was grueling and relentless. Many prisoners literally broke down. Some were so exhausted at the end of the day that they lost consciousness. Others killed themselves or deliberately chopped off a finger or broke a leg to avoid facing another day.



The many stones needed to line the canal banks were all carried by hand.



The walls of the locks were built with logs, fitted and joined together as cribs, then erected and filled with dirt and stones.



Women prisoners worked along side the men like men.



An orchestra, often heard playing during construction, was intended to inspire the prisoners to work harder and to “re-educate” them.



Occasionally, when the brigadier was not around, there was even time for a little rest and even some fun.



Camp Hospital. Prisoners fell ill and died of exhaustion, malnutrition, hypothermia, terrible sanitary conditions and work-related accidents.

Prisoners who fell ill and died of exhaustion, malnutrition, hypothermia, terrible sanitary conditions and work-related accidents were cared for in the camp hospital.



A performance by prisoners from the so-called *agit-brigade* or the propaganda group. One slogan reads: "Let's finish before the deadline."



Camp publications, cartoons, drawings, paintings and simple sheets of paper were posted on the bulletin board for prisoners to read.



“Shock workers,” or prisoners who performed exceptionally well, were rewarded with extra food, including the privilege of eating at a special table beneath posters depicting pictures.



Plays performed on the open stage, with no curtain, almost always in Elizabethan style, often depicted the abysmal prison conditions and poked fun at the guards.



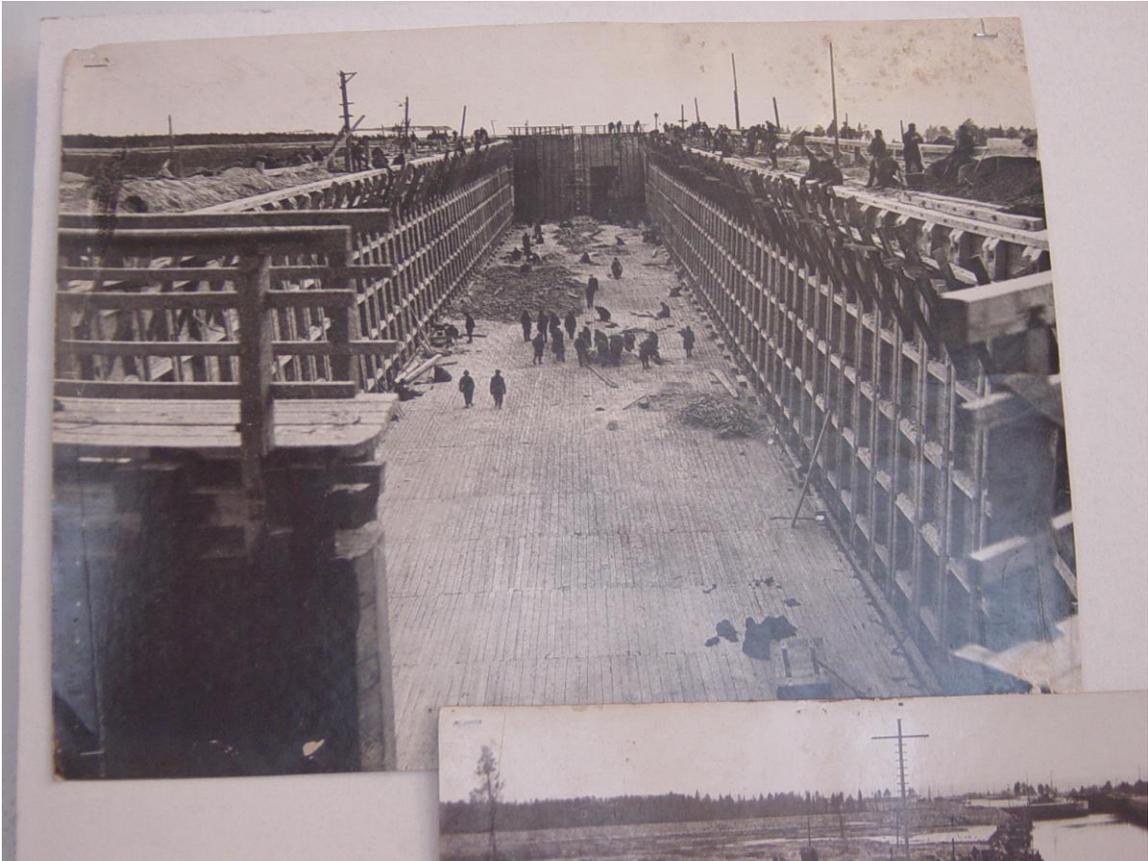
There was political training for employees of the White Sea Canal Construction Administration at Medvezhegorsk.



There was also a sport club for the wives of heads of the construction crew.



Commanders often visited the camps to inspect the work and urge brigadiers to push prisoners to work harder and harder. "The canal must be built in a short time and it must be built cheaply," Stalin had insisted.



As the canal neared completion less workers were needed and so workers were transferred to the Moscow-Volga Canal to build the next canal.



This is one of the 19 locks under construction, made of wood, instead of concrete or iron.



Final inspections were made by the engineers to assure that the work was done properly.



The canal was completed in May 1933 and the first Steamers made their way through the canal in July 1933.



Shortly after its completion, Stalin with Yezhov, Molotov and Voroshilov, undertook a pleasant "excursion" on a steamer to inspect the canal and officially celebrate its completion.