

THE COLOURS OF THE PARALLEL WORLD

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CONTENTS

4	Introduction
9	Glossary
12	The De-Seg
25	The Operative
37	The Security
55	The Untouchables in the Prison Hierarchy
87	The Smell
93	Rebellions Against the Divine Hierarchy
113	The Divine Retribution
117	A Riot in the Prison Quarantine
129	Mowgli
138	The Spaced-Out
155	The Wizard
179	Life is Beautiful
184	An Open Letter
193	The Last Resort
211	The release
220	Afterword

INTRODUCTION

As a child, I read an apt remark in some book: ‘Let an intellectual spend a night in a police station, and he will immediately write a book about it’. I don’t know if I can consider myself an intellectual, and I spent much more than a night in the clutch of the System, but this expression seems to me quite relevant. Indeed, imprisonment and everything connected to it provides you with such a spectrum of feelings and experience that you can hardly gain elsewhere. And for those who are used to critically analysing the experience, it is also an incredibly fertile ground for observation, reflection, and deep thoughts.

According to the idea which I hope to bring about, this collection of stories is just an interim step on the way to a more comprehensive narrative. It is a touch on the canvas which is still to be filled with colours. It gives just a general idea but doesn’t let one embrace the whole picture. Such a picture, I hope, will materialise in my future storybook that will describe my imprisonment from the first day to the last.

Why did I decide to write ‘The Colours of the Parallel World?’ First of all, the authorities have been and are afraid of publicity around everything

that is going on in prison dungeons, intentionally making them as secretive as possible. This means that publicity can do them reputational and moral harm. And if we have an opportunity to inflict such harm, we must use it. Every villain strives to cover their actions or, if this is not possible, to justify them by anything really: the law, sword law, 'revolutionary necessity', morality... To tell the truth and expose misdoings is an imperative, a moral duty of every person. Second of all, it's important to speak about what we've seen and felt for the documentation, too. For no one and nothing lasts forever. And many people in the future can say, 'We haven't done anything... We were just following orders', or 'We didn't know that was happening, otherwise we would have definitely taken action!' Alternatively, they are going to reject everything, 'That's lies, nothing like that happened. Where is the evidence?' And if they are never tried by the people or even the state, the bar of history is the most important thing.

A lot has been said and written about prison. And sometimes it seems to be difficult to tell something new, because the imprisonment stays the same, in all countries - from Asian dictatorships to Western bourgeois democracies. The contents of prisons are the same: despair,

bitterness, fear, pain, dirty tricks and self-sacrifice, mercy and cruelty and, of course, the institutionalised violence, which is a specific language of prison. Will I be able to say anything new? If we look at this from a global perspective, then of course not, since Belarusian prison is not anything unique, especially for the post-Soviet region, and the general logic and philosophy of prison, like I said, are identical everywhere. But on a local scale, I surely will. No false modesty, I can say that my experience on a scale of Belarus was unique. My friends and I became the first anarchists in Belarus sentenced to imprisonment for political actions since the country gained independence. No less unique were also the conditions of our release. I don't know if world history can boast any examples when high officials of European states, from presidents and prime-ministers to US senators, demanded from another state the release of anarchist prisoners (sic!) convicted for direct actions, while in most of these countries there is a bunch of 'domestic' anarchists doing their time. Interestingly, as a result of these demands among other things we were really set free.

Over the five years of my imprisonment I did my sentence in four prisons and three colonies. Only a few convicts in Belarus come

through such a fate. All in all, I spent more than a year in solitary confinement. I could closely see the criminal world and its representatives - professional criminals, 'nomads', as they call themselves. I became the second convict in a twenty-two-year history of Mogilev prison who got convicted there under article 411 of the Criminal Code. I felt first-hand all and any methods of 'correction' - from deprivation of care packages to the transfer to a high-security prison - and tried all and any methods of prison protest - from filing complaints to hunger strikes to self-harm. That's why I hope my experience and the information that I carried out from the inside will be useful: some might need it to withstand the storm in the future, some in order to avoid making similar mistakes, and some, perhaps, for sociological and anthropological research.

The convicts' slang enriched the Russian language by a few hundred if not thousands of words. The translators tried to find certain equivalents of it in English. At the beginning of the book, you will find a short glossary.

Thank you for reading this far. I hope you will find this small storybook interesting.

Many people were instrumental to the materialisation of this book. I want to express gratitude to my father and comrades, because it was thanks to their efforts that I could get out half a year before the end of the sentence; to my professor Vladislav Ivanov - for encouragement and motivational skills; to my wife Lera - for reviews and criticism; to lieutenant-colonel Alexander Litvinsky by virtue of whose vengefulness and hatred I saw what I saw. I also want to tremendously thank the whole punitive system of the Department of Corrections, since its total lunacy and anti-humanism have been and will always be a source of inspiration for me.

GLOSSARY

Correctional colony (or simply colony) – a prison facility which looks like a guarded territory with different buildings; a canteen, sleeping barracks, a sports ground, production area, etc. Prisoners can go outside (still inside the colony bounds), meet other prisoners, work, play sports and so on. In colonies prisoners have to work, but there are some colonies where there's no production and they just hang around.

Prison – a guarded building where prisoners stay in cells for 6-10 people each and have the right to have a walk for 1 hour a day. They don't work and can't meet other prisoners apart from their cellmates. In the book, both colonies and prisons are named after the town they are situated in and given a number, e.g. Gorky colony No. 9.

Protective Custody – a cell, usually in a disciplinary seg-regation (de-seg) or secure housing unit, where they keep convicts who can't be kept with the other convicts. Usually these are people who made some ugly moves like stealing from other prisoners or not paying off their debts,

but also victims of cops' provocations. According to the Correctional Code, any convict can be transferred to a safe place on a written request.

Chow server – a member of household service staff, or a convict who is serving food to those staying in the cells of the disciplinary segregation section, secure housing unit or prison.

Screw, Turnkey – a prison guard, inspector.

Feeder – a small window in the door of a cell through which the convicts are served food, and most of the communication between a convict and the administration is happening.

Secure housing unit (SHU) – cells for convicts who violate the rules in a colony. Usually it's similar to disciplinary segregation (below), but the convict is allowed to have more personal things: letters, books, magazines, more clothes, shop-ping in the colony shop, etc. The warden puts convicts in the secure housing unit for up to 6 months.

Dungeon, De-Seg – a cell for those who violate the rules in a colony. All personal belongings are forbidden there, there is no

mattress to sleep on and no walks allowed. The governor can put convicts to the punishment cell for up to 10 nights.

Shakedown – a search in a cell or a personal search of a convict.

House – a cell.

THE DE-SEG

‘He who didn’t get to the guardhouse did not serve in the army’, former soldiers often say.

Similarly, one can say, ‘He who didn’t stay in the de-seg, was not in prison’.

Without an understanding of what disciplinary segregation, aka the de-seg, or the dungeon is, you can’t embrace the essence of the prison system and many acts of inmates.

According to internal rules of conduct (IRC) and Correctional Code, disciplinary segregation is one of the most severe measures of disciplinary action that is supposed to be applied only in case of major routine violations. But since the definition of ‘major’ violation is not given anywhere, it is fully down to the governor who imposes this punishment.

What is the de-seg? On the territory of the colony, behind an additional layer of barbed wire and a drag road, like on an island, there is a separate barrack - the barrack of de-seg and secure housing unit (SHU), which represents a kind of special prison within the colony. In this barrack (in the case of the de-seg in a prison, it’s just a basement) there are cells like in a regular prison. In one of such cells, they bring a disturber after a ‘disciplinary hearing’.

Imagine a room about two metres long and a metre plus wide with a plank floor. On this small surface there fits a bunk fastened to the wall (it is unfastened by a turnkey from the hallway), a stool, a 'dining' table, a toilet (no toilet bowl, just a shithole closed by a metre-high wall), a sink, and small shelves on the walls. Often they are placed in a way that you can't make even two steps in the cell without stumbling over something. There is a bulb hanging from the ceiling, and a 'window', if it can be called so. Between you and fresh air there is framed glass, bars from the inside and metal blinds on the outside so inmates cannot work together to pass something from cell to cell. This is also meant for larger psychological pressure, so no one can see the sun and the sky. But the administration often shows creativity and makes an additional bar on the 'windows' of the de-seg. The screws from Gorky colony No. 9 can be declared champions of this, installing as many as four or more bars plus the glass. The sunlight almost didn't get to the cell at all. It is very likely they have won praise from the inspection of the Department of Corrections for this know-how.

Before entering the de-seg an inmate will be unavoidably searched. The most important rule is that you can't bring almost any piece of clothing with you, just the uniform. In some colonies they

don't let in even the uniform - in the de-seg, you get a special one with the inscription 'Disciplinary Segregation' on the back. You will be permitted to bring just a towel, soap, toothbrush and toothpaste, and toilet paper. Even razors are not allowed in some colonies. In Gorky colony, for example, those who stay in the de-seg can't shave in the shower, so they won't dismantle the razors to get the razorblade and use it, let's say, to harm themselves. Naturally, nobody thinks of bettering the living conditions of the cons so they stop harming themselves. It's easier to prohibit shaving. As a result, inmates come out of de-seg as hairy as a bogey man.

Everything else you'd like to bring (food, cigarettes, paper, a pen, letters, newspapers, books) is not allowed. In the de-seg, you should remain alone with yourself and, as envisioned by the screws, 'think about your behaviour'.

However, witty cons who don't want to be deprived of cigarettes for ten or more days make the so-called 'torpedo' - bundles of cigarettes that are leak-proof wrapped up in several layers of overwrap and stuffed into the rectum. Naturally, you can't bring a lot of cigarettes this way, so you need to pack them in the 'torpedo' very tightly - there is a whole technology. As a result, an average 'torpedo' containing forty cigarettes is 3-4 centimetres wide in diameter. Most cons cannot bring more than

three 'torpedoes', but I heard about some experts who brought more than nine at a time. After extracting the 'torpedo', the cigarettes need to be stored somewhere safe so they won't be found and retained during a scheduled shakedown of the cell. This also demands a certain resourcefulness and skill from the con.

Three times a day food is served through the feeder of the de-seg cells. Spoons and bowls are not allowed either, they are given out and taken away after the meal. Before 1998, cons in the de-seg were fed like this: one day they would get the meal in smaller quantities than in the sections, the next day they would be kept on bread and water. 'One day the weather is flyable - the other it is not' - this is what the cons called the order, and most of them left the de-seg after 15 days of punishment leaning against the wall. In 1998, the law has changed, but the smaller quantity meal serving remained in the de-seg until 2010. Now the food in the de-seg and in the regular section is identical. Humanisation!

The three meals per day are almost the only thing that you can use to understand what time it is while being in the de-seg, because watches are also forbidden there. Just like everything else that can be instrumental in killing time. You can't receive visitors while staying in the de-seg, phone calls are not allowed. You can't receive care

packages, parcels or letters. There are no walks - you spend 24 hours a day in the concrete box. So the question arises before the con: how to occupy oneself? He needs to find the answer to it, firstly, if he doesn't want to go crazy, secondly, so the time doesn't drag by with such a painful deliberation. The situation is complicated by the fact that cons usually stay in the dungeon alone. Screws know what they are doing. Dumas made an observation: 'captivity that is shared is but half captivity'. The administration of the colony will gladly let you feel yourself The Prisoner of Château d'If¹ and bring you a mate only when all other cells are occupied.

Smokers solve the problem relatively easily: first, you need to take the cigarettes out from the stash, then you wait till the screw passes the eyehole, then you hastily smoke at the window, and now you have to shift the fumes so they don't catch you - that's already some business. Four or five cigarettes a day and the time passes by. Non-smokers have it much more difficult. But in any case, almost all kinds of leisure time activities in the de-seg are forbidden by the internal rules. For that, you can get an additional punishment, for example, an extension of your time in the de-seg.

1 A Soviet movie based on 'The Count of Monte Cristo' by Dumas

Talking to your mates in the neighbouring cell is forbidden, reading or writing - forbidden (even if you by any chance get to bring something, you'll be deprived of it after the first shakedown), sleeping in the daytime is forbidden, and if there are two of you in the cell and you mold some checks from bread and decide to play it - this can be followed by a punishment, too. 'Not prescribed!'

You have little left: pacing about the cell if the 'furniture' allows (usually, it's just five short steps one way), doing sport (if you can call 'sport' the exercises in the room that is almost devoid of fresh air), or just sitting and thinking... I personally found an escape in yoga, meditation, dreams of the future and long 'walks'.

But this all I could do only during the day. The most interesting things in the de-seg start at night. According to the internal rules, mattresses, like other bedsheets, are not allowed in the de-seg, instead of them, a bunk is unfastened for the night. The inmates never sleep on it though, they sleep on the floor, because it's warmer there. If it's not thirty or more degrees above zero, at night you will participate in a nice adventure called 'Try to sleep'. Not only you will have to sleep on the planks which is a bit hard for want of habit, but the cold will rarely let you sleep more than 30-40 minutes. Having slept for half an hour (depends

on the temperature in the cell), you will wake up from shivering and realise that you can't sleep anymore, and you will get on point very quickly why they took away all your warm clothes during the search! The survival instinct will faultlessly prompt you: if it's impossible to raise the temperature of the environment, you should at least raise the temperature of your body. You will start doing exercises from the school PT class in order to pump the blood along the stiff limbs. If you are successful with this task, you can sleep another half an hour. You will have to alternate exercise and sleep until the morning call, when the chow server will bring you hot (if you are lucky) tea and a bowl of porridge for breakfast.

Over time, you get more experienced: entering the cell, you stick toilet paper on the window frame (there is no fresh air, but it's warmer), find some spots that are more comfortable for sleeping (I identified them by the worn out paint on the floor: you should sleep on the spot where it's most worn out, because it points to the fact that many people had slept here before myself), tuck your pants into the socks to save the fractions of warmth, make a nice pillow from your slippers and rolls of toilet paper.

In any case, you will wake up heavy-headed, and you will be sleepy all day long. Finally, giving

in to this desire, you will lay down on the floor, and the screw will gladly write you up (didn't you forget? It's forbidden to sleep at day time!) In a few days the door will open and you will be informed, 'On that date at that time this inmate was sleeping on the cell floor number X of the disciplinary segregation by which he violated that article of the Internal Rules of Conduct'. And you will be offered to sign the write-up for another 10 days. Cops consider it an exclusive style to bring this paper in the last hours, even minutes before the release from the de-seg when you relish ahead of time how you are going to drink some hot coffee with a chocolate in a little while and sleep this night in a warm and soft bed.

How long can they keep an inmate in the disciplinary segregation? Until 2008 this term amounted to 15 days. Later, with another wave of 'humanisation', it was decreased to ten, but de-facto nothing has changed, since it entails a single punishment, for one violation of the rules. For 'rule violations in disciplinary segregation', they can keep an inmate there for as long as they want. 'Sleeping on the floor' is not the only reason. In every colony, there is a special typical kiss-off which is written up for a con to prolong his term in the de-seg. In every colony, there are unique ways to prolong the con's term in segregation. In some

of them, it is 'he didn't clean up the cell', in others - 'an unbuttoned collar'. I will never forget how in Shklov colony No. 17, where I ended up in the de-seg two hours after I had come to the colony, I decided, well, I will not give them a reason now, I will do everything routinely. I'll be hard to fault, and they will have to let me out in ten days! I cleaned up the cell with a tiny cloth: removed the spider web, dust, dirt, even in the spots which I was sure had not been cleaned since the beginning of times. The evening control. The door opens. Three screws and a duty associate governor altogether literally burst into a confined cell and start frenziedly waggling their heads looking around, passing hands over shelves, edges of the bunk, radiators, the table, bending down, getting under the table and almost grabbing trying to find dust or some grain of dirt. All in vain - the cell is sparkly clean. Then one of the screws, who was passing over the shelf with a slightly peeled off old paint pinched it and rubbed the paint. The frecks of it remained on his hand:

'Look! Here is the dust! You are getting a ticket!'

I don't remember what I answered them. But that incident has for good buried the faith that a political in a colony can be 'left alone'.

Another incident happened in Gorky colony No. 9. A guy who knew that screws were angry

with him and were likely to prolong his stay in the de-seg deliberately behaved perfectly - buttoned up his shirt, didn't sleep at day time, etc. So there comes another day. Lunch is over. A few of his cellmates (he wasn't alone) hit the sack on the floor. The door opens, the duty associate governor enters into the house. He doesn't pay attention to those sleeping. The following conversation starts between him and the 'exemplary con':

'Why aren't you sleeping?'

'I don't violate the daily regimen!'

'Oh, don't you? Then I'm writing you up, a ticket!'

And then at the disciplinary hearing, the inmate can do his best to prove that he didn't sleep or violate some other rule. I haven't heard of or seen a single case where this reasoning helped anyone to soften the punishment, saying nothing of avoiding it.

In Shklov colony No. 17 in the old times, when you could often see mobile phones in the pen, the operatives hammered in the cons that they will get 30 days in the de-seg for possession of a mobile phone. How come thirty, if it's only fifteen by law? Basically, the person is not yet in the de-seg, but the cops already know that he will violate the rules there and they will have to give him another 15 days?

The impudence of cops and acceptance of lawlessness by the cons are just comically absurd. One of the ex-cons of Orsha colony No. 8 told me how he received additional days in the dungeon. At the control round, the duty associate governor enters the cell, checks the number of people in the cell according to his list. He sees who is on duty in the cell and if it's the one who is supposed to be railroaded by request of the operatives, he says without even looking up from the list, 'Ivanov, the spider web!' and leaves. It means that there is a spider web under the ceiling in the cell - or the duty associate governor believes that it's there, and it doesn't matter if it's really there - and it is the fault of the cell duty who didn't clean it properly. It means that he will get a ticket, which will be looked into by the governor at a disciplinary hearing where the staff of the colony, in their turn, will decide if they want to impose a disciplinary punishment on Ivanov. But an inmate doesn't need such a long reasoning. The word 'spider web' after his surname means one thing: his stay in the de-seg is extended at least by 10 days. But during this performance nobody even asks any questions, it's a symbiotic relationship!

I researched but I didn't find any legal act limiting the period of stay of an inmate in the de-seg without leaving it. The longest period

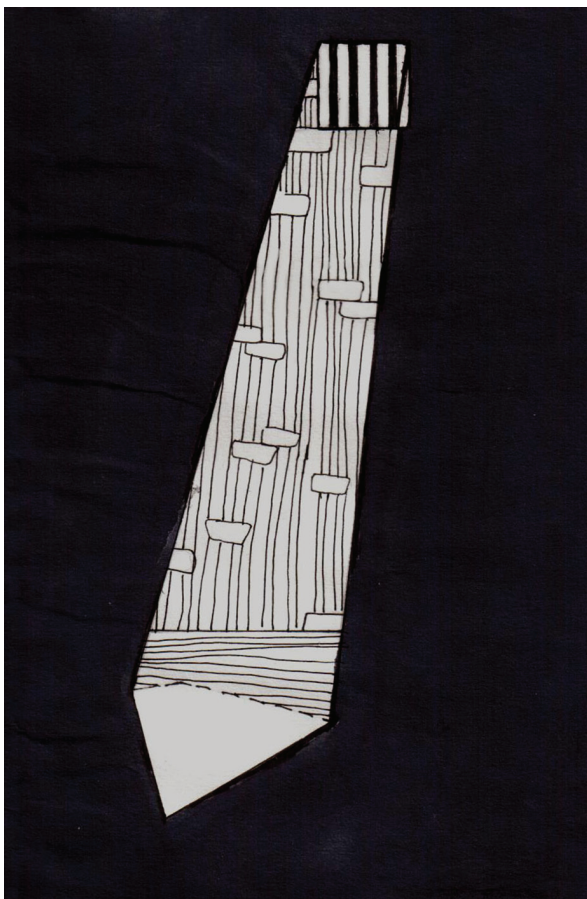
I spent there uninterruptedly was twenty days, and my total days inside there by the release had amounted to half a year. A former inmate Yauhen Vaskovich² would spend thirty days uninterruptedly in the de-seg of Mogilev prison, and all in all, he lost a year there. I was there when one guy was held in the segregation for 60 days uninterruptedly, just because he didn't want to sign the 'commitment of law-abiding conduct'.

And my cellie in the Mogilev prison in 2005 spent 180 days in the de-seg without a break! Every 15 days he was taken to the quarters to write up another ticket and then brought back again. And it was like 12 times...

That's why whenever you will happen to hear from a cop, former or active, or a state journalist, or a corrupt pseudo human rights defender about the humane and European standards of imprisonment in Belarusian prisons, just tell them about the night push-ups, 180 days in a concrete box and 'the spider web'.

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2 A political activist who tried to burn KGB headquarters in a provincial town in solidarity with arrested anarchists in 2010 and received 7 years of imprisonment himself.



THE OPERATIVE

This is a phenomenon of the Soviet and, alas, post-Soviet reality. This word is familiar to everyone who has ever been imprisoned. The person who is defined by this word can be a smiling youth with a sly squint or a soon-to-retire man with gray hair and a weary gaze. They can be an arm waver with shifty eyes or a polite intellectual looking at you calmly and intently, a flabby lazy-bone or a bigoted professional. The sum and substance of them stay the same.

The operative.

In the times of tsarist Russia, they were called gendarmes, later simply agents of Cheka, Criminal Investigation or similar structures. Now they are called 'the operatives'. I wonder what they are called in other countries. Agents? Police inspectors? Detectives? Have they left behind a trail of blood that 'our' operative has had behind them for almost 100 years?

Official duties of the operative spelled out in fancy laws include collecting intelligence, controlling the operating environment and hence aiding the detection of offenses while defending the 'rights and legitimate interests of citizens'. (Laughter) But the reality of these guys with 'a

cool head and a warm heart' (the portraits of the author of this metaphor, the sadist Dzerzhinsky¹, are still a must-have in every operative's office) naturally, extends far beyond such dull and uninteresting statements.

My first encounter with the operatives happened on September 4, 2010, in the cabinets of the temporary detention centre in Okrestina st., on the following day after my detention. Two agents with watchful stares and manners of masters of the Universe, Sokolov, and Yaroshik. During hours-long conversations they were trying to prove to me that it's much better to become scum and a traitor than to do time for many years. They tested various psychological techniques one by one. I was told that they 'know everything' and I just need to better my lot by telling 'the whole truth'; that my friends had ratted on me; that I'm being used, but they want to help me (oh, classic!). One of them even confessed he shared my anarchist beliefs in the privacy of his thoughts. Afterwards, a KGB agent started his conversation with the same phrase - probably, this is their algorithm of work with the politicals. They would usually finish with a vivid

1 Felix Dzerzhinsky – head of Soviet secret service Cheka notorious for mass summary executions, performed especially during the Red Terror and the Russian Civil War.

description of horrors awaiting me in prison, once again suggesting me to betray my friends in order to save myself.

But what are 10-15 hours of interrogation compared to five years within which the operatives became my permanent companions?

The prison operative and an operative from the criminal persecution and the KGB essentially belong to the same biological species. They are identical and replaceable, but here I will tell you exclusively about the prison operative since only by being in constant contact with him you can absorb, feel, understand through suffering and remember for the whole life the role and place of these creatures in our world.

In the times of GULAG, the cons recruited by an operative in a labour camp were overhearing the conversations between other inmates, creeping into favour they drew people out, the result of which were new criminal cases for 'counterrevolutionary conspiracies', 'anti-Soviet agitation', 'preparation for a breakout', etc. Eventually, the victim of an operative's protégé received a new sentence in addition to the main one or was even executed. Even though it doesn't happen anymore, the methods and the essence of the operative work remained. An operative in prison and in a colony is lord and master. It's up to him where and with

whom a con lives, if he can receive care packages or is entitled to have visits from relatives, if he goes to the punishment cell and generally if he is going to feel good or bad in a colony.

The operative of the section uses recruited cons (bitches) to pull the strings of the public opinion, and it's a walkover for him to have a disagreeable person categorised as a 'downcast'² or be systematically abused.

In a certain sense, an operative plays a bigger role than a governor, since the governor is far away, and the operative is always around. In the covert hierarchy of the administration of the 'correctional' institution - regime, operative, medical, special or correctional process departments - the operative department occupies the top of the pyramid. The operative is the all-mighty. 'In order to live happily and joyfully, pull the door-handle of the operative department', 'Remember yourself and pass around: the way to the operative department is a way home', - the inmates' folklore is full of irony.

The operative is a victimiser for those who must suffer, in his opinion, and a sponsor of all kinds of benefits and privileges for his bitches. In

2 See more on the caste system in prisons in the essay 'The Untouchables in The Prison Hierarchy'

Mogilev colony No. 15, an operative sent me to a punishment cell for five days for an 'improper' manner of talking to a visitor from the Department for Organized Crime Control. A formal reason for that was the fact that I entered his office wearing an unbuttoned jacket, though everyone always came to him dressed like this.

In Shklov colony No. 17, for some time the cons were allowed to bring an unlimited amount of fruit and vegetables from visiting rooms. Later it was forbidden by the regime department as part of the usual and permanent hardening of the regime in the pen. But the operative put about a rumour through his recruits, 'It's the father of Dziadok that complained, so we prohibited it'. It's difficult to imagine a more villainous way of splitting a person from the prison collective.

Once in Mogilev prison No. 4, I reported to the operative with a beautiful surname Likhuta that the censor who works under his direct supervision was holding six cards from Switzerland addressed to me. 'How come?', I said. 'There is nothing special there, just cards with congratulations!'

'OK, I'll figure it out', was his answer.

Within the following week, the censor held three very regular letters from my father and wife. The special gimmick of Mogilev prison is an empty envelope with a stapled sheet reading:

‘The letter didn’t pass the censorship’. It’s an operative-style hint - be content with the letters you get, otherwise, we will deprive you of them, too.

The operative is a Jesuit. At an interrogation in the KGB, the operatives, ‘experts’ in anarchism, tried to prove to my comrade Ihar Alinevich the inconsistency of the anarchist theory:

‘You are doing karate. It is hierarchical!’

By this, they wanted to impair the tired consciousness of an inmate, to undermine his self-righteous belief. Similarly, in the first days after the detention, seeing that ‘the frontal attack’ hadn’t worked, the operatives told me:

‘We are up and write on Indymedia that you’ve ratted on everyone!’

The already mentioned Likhuta had a conversation with me when I thought I had just 3.5 more months to go:

‘So what are you going to do on the outside? Will you leave for some other country? And what about work? It’s so expensive there. Well, good luck!’

Sometime later I got to know that at the time of this conversation it had been four days since he sent my files to the Investigation Committee in order to bring another case against me under article 411. So he knew perfectly well that I would

get one more year, and he decided to tease me with dreams of the Free World. This is an example of how a person can comprehensively characterise himself by a single act.

The operative is a liar. Lies is his main and favourite weapon for submission of others and extraction of 'intelligence'. 'Tell us this and that - and you'll be free immediately. You have the word of the officer!' - this is what operatives often say to suspects under interrogation. How many naive and credulous people fell for this and incriminated themselves and sometimes, unwittingly, others as well. So the person gets his 5, 10, any number of years, but not thanks to the investigation who gathered incriminating evidence, but due to his own credulity. The operative will pledge any word, swear, promise anything you want, will call you a friend, say that he shares your ideas, he will show compassion, rail against the authorities - if only to get from you the testimonies he needs, no matter how true they are. And once he gets it, he will order to bring you back to your cell. Now you are a write-off, and your heartache caused by the betrayed trust is no one's concern, the main thing is that the case isn't coming apart. How many are railroaded - out of the blue - how many cold cases are brought to court! And yet the people who fall for that are obviously not the jailbirds, but green

and more or less decent people who hadn't been in conflict with the law before and who don't suspect that the attendants of the law can lie so blatantly.

Once I frankly reproached an operative from No. 15 for his constant reassurance of the fact that he 'doesn't have anything to do' with my jawboning: 'That's not true, Sir. You are deceiving me all the time'. And he answered smiling, 'It's my profession to deceive'.

With this cruel nature, the operative cannot but be a racist.

The hateful agent of the Department for Organised Crime Control, Mr. Litvinsky, during a conversation with me in No. 15 started criticising 'skinheads' saying that his grandfather was at war and then added, 'I don't like blacks either. But I don't beat them!' Operative Shamyonov from No. 17 was telling me for a long time about his vision of the terrorist attack of Anders Breivik: 'This is what the multiculturalism lead to!' And added proudly, 'Here in Belarus I can walk in the street and not be afraid that gooks will beat the shit out of me'.

The operative is the torturer of human souls. In No. 15 one guy complained to me that the operative was co-opting him demanding that he reports about what is being talked about among

the cons, where they have prohibited items and stuff like this. Otherwise, he promised a lot of troubles. It was not accidentally that the operative started to lie heavy on him specifically: that guy vitally needed the release on parole - he had a small kid on the outside and the wife was in custody in Volodarka. He did his best to avoid violations of the rules, diligently sweat his guts out in the industry area and worried about his people all the time. Definitely, the operative knew it all and hence opted for him. I watched the moral suffering and ambivalence of that con - between family and consciousness, well-being of relatives and possible consequences of turning into a bitch. He tried to wiggle out, told some irrelevant and well-known things. But it didn't work out. Soon I was taken away from No. 15 and I never learned what was the end of this little drama. I hope that guy did understand that you can't be a halfway traitor.

One should not be afraid of those who can murder the body, but can't do anything to the soul, but one should be scared of those who kill the soul. This is something you understand over time. In the system of Ministry of Interior there are both body murderers and soul killers. All of them - executioners from the firing squads and 'the operatives' - get money for their own murder.

True, the operative leaves alive the body, an organism driven by instincts and basic needs, but this is not a personality in the full sense of the word anymore. The nuance is that if the character of a person who got to prison fundamentally has even a slight decay, a grain of meanness and indecency, then under the vigilant supervision of the operative it is certain to grow and suck everything nice from a person. This is encouraged by the very atmosphere of the pen, its moral climate with the imperative 'Spit on the near, kick the lower'. And the operative, undoubtedly, will cultivate this person - speed up the growth of the sprouts, selecting a fertiliser individually depending on the distinctive features of the victim's character. For some, it will be an extra visit from a wife, for some, the fear for personal security, for others, the influence in the community. Some just need a pack of tea and cigarettes. But the result will always be the same: a person leaves prison thoroughly corrupt, unscrupulous, and with no beliefs. In his perception of the world the margins of good and evil are blurred. And this is all the result of the work of the 'operative department of the correctional institution'.

Sometimes I wonder, what kind of people they are in normal life? Because not all of them beat their wives or kids, or cheat on their friends...

Probably, they are also able to love their people, care about them, be nice to their wives and mothers, laugh heartily, make friends, generally, to experience human feelings. They must have a really good time on holidays and celebrations. Hugging their friends and colleagues they sing their favourite songs with a glass in the hand:

‘Yeah! Yeah! If tomorrow is better than yesterday,

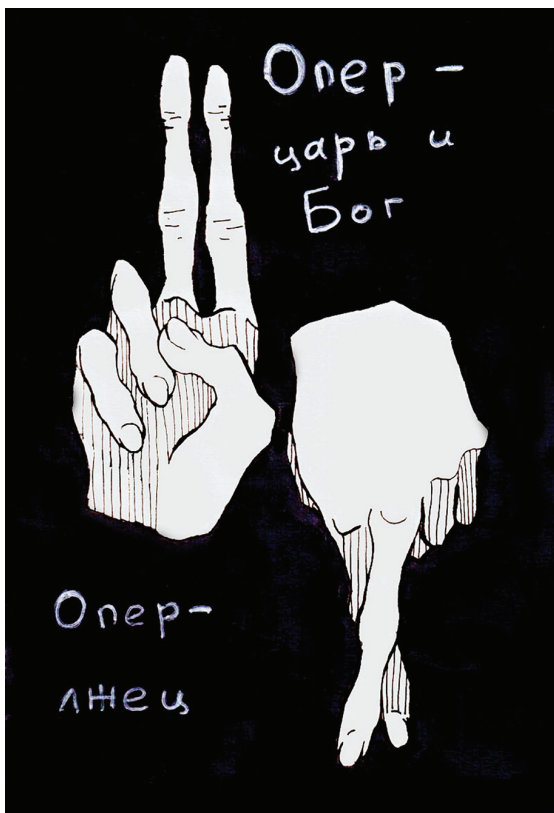
"We'll make it", policemen will answer...’³

Of course, you will. In a vivacious ceremonial step.

Directly to hell.

March 2015

³ Lyrics of a popular Russian song ‘We’ll make it’ from a TV series about the operatives.



The Operative is a King. The Operative is a God.
The operative is a Liar.

THE SECURITY

There are cruel phenomena. There are meaningless phe-nomena. But any phenomena and things seem to be crueler if they are meaningless. This includes prison security - the Moloch for whom the physical and psychological comfort of prisoners, their piece of mind and self-respect are sacrificed.

A person who ends up in prison for the first time initially feels lost and stupefied. With the mind of a normal, free individual he can't get the idea of what is demanded of him by the guards whose answer to everything is 'that's the rou-tine'.

Everything begins with a shakedown. Before putting him in a cell, he is searched and his belt and shoelaces are taken from him. Surprised, he asks:

'Why can't I have them?'

'It's against the routine!' a cop growls in reply. Later from more experienced cell-mates, he will learn that he will need to pull up his pants all the time and walk in sneakers that resemble funny worn-out slippers because one can hang oneself with shoelaces. But the most interesting things start in the pretrial facility when relatives begin to bring him care packages. Cigarettes?

They have to be taken out of the pack and put into a transparent bag. Tea? It can only be passed in a transparent bag, too. Candies? Each of them should be unwrapped (imagine how much work you should do to pass on a thirty-kilo care package. Soda? No way! Cottage cheese, milk, curd snacks, butter - forbidden! Honey? No way! Why? 'It's against the routine!' Something in a glass bottle? God forbid! 'They will cut each other open!' Tinned food - forbidden, 'they will make a chiv'¹.

And if suddenly relatives go to all kinds of governors and start complaining, they will be shown a long list of various resolutions and warrants, the Internal Rules of Conduct and directives of the sanitation centre. From there, relatives will learn that dairy products are forbidden because they are afraid of epidemics, cigarettes need to be unpacked because you can hide something inside a pack, the same reason applies to candies, and for the same reason every apple, orange, any fruit or vegetable that you want to deliver to an inmate will be pierced by an awl (and it doesn't matter that it will 'live' for just a few days after that). Any vacuum package will be holed, any chocolate broken into small pieces.

1 A hand-made knife or similar sharp weapon.

But let's leave pretrial facilities aside. In a colony where an inmate goes after the sentence, he will face new disclosures and new bewilderment. There is a mandatory search on arrival. Everything 'you don't need' is taken away and put in the storing room where it will stay until your release. This is a very dramatic moment for any inmate: everything they had collected over a year or more, everything that former cell-mates had given away when they were packing him for prison transfer goes to the storing room or to the dumpster. But food is just half the trouble. The most annoying thing happens with clothes or shoes bought by relatives. In temporary detention and pretrial facilities, in some colonies shoes are allowed only without a metal shank, since you can do a chiv from it as well. In order to understand if there are shanks in the shoes screws brutally bend a sneaker or a boot, break the sole and put it through a metal detector. If they are your only shoes, they will give you a replacement (the so-called 'brogans'), and if they are bought by relatives for you, they will simply be returned - the money is wasted.

The Internal Rules of Conduct of Correctional Facilities (IRC) are organised in a very artful way. Instead of listing things that an inmate can't have, they list things that an inmate is allowed

to have. Thus, everything else is forbidden and one can get into the de-seg for having items that are not on the list.

To say that the list of accepted things is insufficient for normal worthy existence, especially for those who have long terms, is an understatement. Take at least such a trifle: every inmate has to move within the territory of the colony in the uniform (a jumpsuit, or officially, 'a cotton costume'). This is the 'order of dress of an inmate'. But the jumpsuit has to be washed once in a while. And if you washed it, it should dry. What should you wear to the canteen, to work, or in a small yard next to the block? The only thing that is left is a tracksuit. But what a collision: if you put on a tracksuit, you will do a 'dress infraction'. You will get a write-up and can be sent to the de-seg. And nobody cares that your jumpsuit is just washed and is drying on a rope. And you can't not wash it. If they see you wearing a dirty jumpsuit, you can also get a write-up because 'an inmate should have an orderly outfit' (IRC). And so cons bustle about to wear clean clothes without getting into the de-seg: some are hiding in the middle of the row on the way to the canteen to avoid the eyes of the screws, some borrow a jumpsuit from dorm-mates. By the way, you are not allowed to have two jumpsuits, if they find it during a shakedown, it's going to be confiscated and you can get a write-up

(again a possibility of the de-seg is on the horizon). This problem - what to wear when you've washed your clothes - is years old, but noone, from heads of sections to chiefs of the Department of Corrections, cares about the inconvenience of some cons. It's easier to send ten, twenty, thirty people from the prison population to the de-seg every year, than to change a few sentences in the IRC once.

The clothes' saga doesn't end with this. A few years before my release literally in all colonies the administration initiated entire 'campaigns' against zipper jackets, sweaters and tracksuit jackets under 'cotton costumes'. The fight against zippers was started just to normalise inmates' clothing. Up to a certain time in the colony, people wore black jackets with zippers that were passed to them by relatives from the outside, until some official from the Department of Corrections came with an inspection and asked a question: 'Why are your inmates not wearing uniform?' Because 'uniform' means awkward body-warmer (that doesn't warm you up at all) fitted with rotten wadding and with buttons almost falling off. The madness started: first in one colony and then in others, they began to subtract jackets 'from the outside' and give out body-warmers instead. Those who tried to revolt were sent to the de-seg.

This is how the fight with the main enemies of the 'correctional process' - sweaters and track jackets - looked. It's autumn or spring, it's cold outside. A section of cons goes out to work in the industry area and waits for a search at a checkpoint. Everyone is being searched in turns and forced to unbutton the 'cotton costume'. If there is a track jacket or a sweater under it, you must go back to the dorm and take it off. If you start complaining, you'll get into the de-seg. No matter that it's ten degrees above zero outside and you have just a light t-shirt under your 'cotton costume'. No matter that after such a search cons will be shivering from cold the whole day and half of the section will rush to the infirmary with a cold or flu. But any authorities who visit the pen will be contented: 'The order of dress is observed'.

Such campaigns in every colony are started often, chaotically and unpredictably. Something clicks in the mind of Doroshko², and a circular travels in colonies, and governors readily demonstrate their 'can-do' spirit. Today zippers in jackets, tomorrow - boots of 'nonregulation pattern', the day after tomorrow - steel spoons (everyone should have aluminum ones!), then a purge campaign against 'taking bread out of the

2 Head of the Department of Corrections.

canteen' (it's when they write you up for bringing your bread portion to the dorm) and so on... Cons identify these campaigns by long lines in front of the checkpoint, where an irritated whisper is heard, 'Again? What the fuck is this time? Are they checking labels on our underpants? They are fucking kidding...'

In Shklov colony No. 17 there was, or maybe still is, if he wasn't promoted, a deputy governor Pavel Yegulevsky aka Mercedes, a very diligent old git. During one of such campaigns (back then they were fighting against trousers of a wrong cut) he stood at the checkpoint with a paper knife and literally cut trouser legs on the cons. One of them got his leg cut this way. The guy turned out to be not the most 'suppressed'. He turned high-minded and started to demand his rights, and his relatives complained to various institutions. But it didn't bring any results, Mercedes got away with it.

It takes off from there. The reinforcement of security crawls into every crack of the inmate's everyday life. Every con has a bed table. Do you think they can store everything that is allowed there? Yeah, right! A few years ago in every sleeping room they've hung a list of what cons may have on the bed table. The list is very short: one pen, one notebook, two books, one or two

envelopes, one pack of cigarettes and one package of tea. That's all! There is no food on this list. You will ask, where can you store the rest of your things? For that, according to the wise resolutions of cops from the Department of Corrections, in every section there is a 'storage room for personal items', or, in thieves' Latin, 'the stores'. In charge of this room is a supply clerk, a con who has the key to it. The power and privileges of the supply clerk are obvious. If you are friends with him, then you have a steady clout in the section. But what does it mean to have your things there? What can be easier, you might say, you can come there anytime and take whatever you need. There is no need to clutter up the sleeping block. Exactly, but the room is open twice a day for 20-30 minutes. And you are for sure not the only from a hundred of cons in the section who wants to get there and take something - a new pair of socks, a piece of lard, a book or a pack of cigarettes. 'Enter the storage room for personal items one by one!' says an announcement on the door. You finally seized the moment when the supply clerk entered the stores, waited in the line and forced your way through to the precious room to open your bag and take a chocolate from there to have a tea with a companion, or a book to spend a solo evening. You grab your thing, close the bag and leave? Yeah, right! In every bag, there is an

inventory of belongings that you've made on your arrival to the section. It contains everything, from ball pen refills to underwear, candies, magazines or other unsophisticated belongings that you've acquired in the colony. If you take something, cross it out, if you put something inside, write it down. It's important not to forget it since every few months there is a 'routine arrangement', namely 'an inspection of outer appearance with taking out of belongings'. The section lines up on a small field, everyone has his bags and the governor checks the inventory against the contents of the bags. If something is wrong, you get a ticket. An example that became definitive at that time: Mikalai Statkevich³ was sent to the de-seg because the number of handkerchiefs in the inventory didn't match the number of them in his bag.

Often times, like in any bureaucratic and hierarchical system, demands of different superiors conflict with each other. This is very well illustrated by an incident in Gorky colony No. 9. In every cell in the SHU and the de-seg there is a radio (it is switched on and off with the guard's remote control), but without volume control: you'll have

3 An ex-candidate for presidency convicted after the elections in 2010.

to listen to the radio with the volume a guard has put it. But suddenly this facility was visited by a regular inspection from the Department of Corrections. Some big boss looked at the radio sets in cells and asked, 'Why is there no volume control on them? That's improper!'

And right after his departure 'kozly'⁴ and household staff under the guidance of the administration installed volume controls in every cell. The cons were happy! But time has passed, there came another boss from the same Department of Corrections. He looked up and nearly fainted: 'Why would you provide them with volume controls? Are you out of your minds?' In his opinion, that was just unacceptable comfort, an orgy of hedonism and amorality. In a matter of hours, the staff (the same cons who were installing the controls) were already pulling them out of all cells in the de-seg and SHU which amount to twenty.

But it would be naive to think that the level of security concerns only material aspect, what inmates can or can't have. Like I said, the sense of security is in permeating all spheres of life. The regimen regulates the wakeup and bedtime. If

4 Cons collaborating with the administration. See more in the essay 'The Untouchables in The Prison Hierarchy'.

you are a few minutes late, you get a ticket or are maybe sent to the de-seg. If in a colony that can be somehow rationalised (the unit needs to go to the canteen, to work), in the de-seg a strict wake-up and bedtime defies explanation, especially when cells are overcrowded and half of their population doesn't have an opportunity to sleep at night and goes to bed at daytime. Not only sleeping, you are not allowed even to lay on beds during the day. And the brain of a person who's just got into prison give up understanding - why? Who would suffer, if a person in custody jail (his guilt is not established yet, he is a defendant, not a convict) lays down on the bunk in the afternoon and sleeps a bit? And what else can you do in a cell? No way, just try and a watchful guard will immediately kick the door: 'No sleeping!!!' In Zhodino pretrial facility cops take a step further - you can't put your legs on a bunk while sitting! But sitting normally, with feet on the floor, is not comfortable - the bunks have iron angles that dig into thighs. Other 'furniture', if it can be called so, is obviously designed for anyone, but people. It's iron-clad, hard, cracked, either too high, or too low. But people get used to it, there is no getting around it...

When someone from the administration enters a cell, a con must report. It looks as follows: 'Sir governor, there is this number of convicts in cell

number X. Sanitary condition is satisfactory. Today on duty is X. No complaints or appeals'. In different facilities, the text slightly varies. Such a report sounds especially funny in solitary, when you sit alone for years and twice a day at the check you say, 'Today on duty is Dziadok' as if yesterday there was somebody else on duty...

From an outside perspective, individually all these rules and requirements can seem inessential. No big deal - to button up a shirt when passing a screw, to suffer the inconvenience with washing the jumpsuit, to report or clean a bed table, all the more so because this is a prison, not a sanatorium. But that just sounds simple. The life of an inmate is composed of such trifles. There are hundreds of them. Everything is increasingly regulated by the routine which complicates your already not so pampered life. And finally, there is no space for your spontaneous actions, even in regard to doing your bed or spending your free time which is not abundant. Every minute you have to act cautiously and think: 'Did I do it right? Will I be punished for it?' Of course, up to a certain time screws don't pay attention to a lot of slight deviations from the regime, until there comes a warrant saying that there are few people in the de-seg, or until a certain con starts asserting his rights. Then you will be quickly reminded about an extra pen

in your drawer, or your unshaven face, or a spider net in the cell. If you are a political prisoner, you will be reminded about it from the very start. The phrasing of the security requirements in the way it's done at the moment significantly facilitates the task of sending any con to the de-seg and of general all-out jawboning. No need to make anything up, frame up, just wait for a few hours and a con will violate something himself since it's impossible to follow all the rules. The logic of security officers makes cons perceive basic comfort or any opportunity to obtain their needs as a privilege, for retention of which they should behave as meek as a lamb.

On the other hand, security exists in order to humiliate the inmates, to make them feel disempowered and dependent from the administration even in regard to basic needs. Why do you think in the KGB jail ('Amerikanka') there are no toilets in half of the cells? Is there really no money or possibility to install them? In the 21st century, there is a piss can in the cells, and inmates are taken to the toilet twice a day to go number two. The answer is simple: an inmate should feel that even the call of nature totally depends on the administration, and the best choice of all available is to completely conform to it in other things.

And this is true for everything else. I will never forget how cons cut their nails in cells of Volodarka. To do this simple hygienic procedure which doesn't take a lot of time on the outside, in prison meant the whole strategic operation. In our cell, we had nail clippers (forbidden item, of course). At first, you had to take them out from the stash out of sight of the screw who could look into the eyehole any time, then bring them to the toilet (a blind spot that couldn't be seen from the eyehole), turn on the water and only then start clipping your nails. The water was turned on to cover the distinctive sound 'tchick, tchick' by the noise of running water and prevent a screw from understanding that there is a forbidden item in the cell. Then you had to put the clippers back taking the same precautions.

It's emblematic that on the official level cops try to rationalise any interdiction: belts can be used to hang oneself, cottage cheese is banned so that the cons don't get poisoned, clothes with zippers are not allowed because inmates have to look the same, food can't be kept in the bed table for sanitary reasons, and so on. But not every interdiction can be rationalised however hard you try. Why do you need to report: 'One convict in the cell, today on duty is the same convict'? Why not let cons put their legs on the bed? Does it put

anyone in danger? You can find answers to these questions. Internal documents of a correctional facility come to rescue; their contents I happened to hear myself. During my stay in the SHU in Shklov colony No. 17, 'according to the routine', they used to play excerpts from the Internal Rules of Conduct and various other laws and regulations. I even wrote something down verbatim. Unfortunately, I don't remember exactly the title of this regulation. So you sit in solitary, and a metal voice broadcasts through the speaker:

'The security of correctional facilities [...] The correctional function of the security lies in setting of interdictions and limitations in regard to an inmate. The aim of interdictions and limitations lies in causing suffering and emotional stress for an inmate that is intended to make him reflect on his previous behaviour'.

When I first heard it, I couldn't believe my ears. What about the Criminal Code which puts in black and white that 'punishment and other measures of criminal liability DO NOT aim at causing physical suffering or abasement of human dignity'? Finally, in their 'internal' regulations, the System exposes itself and demonstrates the true goal of the security. And for a con who is wondering from the first day of imprisonment what all these rules that can't be explained, justified or rationalised are

for, everything falls into place. They are there to make him suffer. And all the semiofficial chatter of the screws about 'sanitary conditions', 'security measures' and so on is nothing more than the wool over eyes that is pulled in order to add the facade of validity and humanism to hominivorous and ruthless system that has only one aim - to break your will by causing suffering.

Interestingly, the security and its requirements make real idiots of the already not-so-smart staff of the correctional facilities. Once in Zhodino prison, we managed to get a TV-set installed in the cell. But in the concrete box, it got a very poor signal, and it wasn't possible to move it closer to the window: the cable was short and the extension pole was naturally prohibited. So it just stayed in the middle of the cell. But when it was placed on the floor, people couldn't watch it from other corners of the cell, we needed to put it up. We didn't have so much choice and we put it on an overturned wash-basin. After some time security officers enter the cell with a shakedown. Their boss has perky eyes; he turns his head trying to find fault with something. A trained eye notices an anomaly - the TV-set on an overturned basin.

'Why do you have the TV on a basin?'

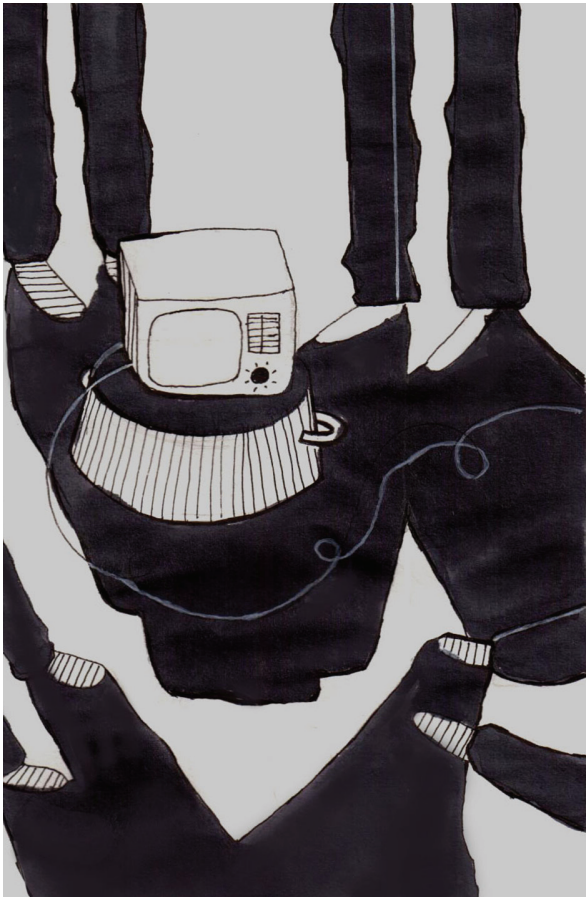
'We can't see it when it's on the floor, and the cable is too short to put it on the table'.

His facial expression becomes dissatisfied. A deviation from the routine, non-regulated situation, he needs to react fast:

‘I mean, also..!’ for a moment a good deal of thought is reflected on his face. ‘The basin wears out!’

When the door closed, we roared with laughter from this cop for half an hour, he made our day. We made a conclusion: what a fate, you are in your thirties and go around the cells and tell the cons about the ‘wear-out of a basin’. Well, you’ve got to feel for such people. They created this security for us, but now they, its servants, are even less free than cons in prison.

June 2016



THE UNTOUCHABLES IN THE PRISON HIERARCHY

The issue of the prison caste system is often raised in the media, and recently it has been discussed in relation to political prisoners. However, almost everyone who writes on the subject knows about the matter from the stories of former inmates or use common social stereotypes at best. As a result, there are often a lot of blunders and false representation.

The aim of this article is to shed light on some aspects of such a complex and multifaceted phenomenon as informal hierarchy in Belarusian prisons.

People even write scientific works on this subject. And, of course, I do not mean to consider the phenomenon in all its diversity in one article. I'm going to discuss mainly one prison caste, the existence of which characterizes the system as a whole, and the knowledge of which is critically important for any person getting to jail in Belarus, especially for a political prisoner. These are so-called "*petukhs*" ('downcasts', 'brats', 'punks', 'prison bitches').

So, from this text, you will learn:

- How did the 'downcasts' appear in prison;

- How do people become one;
- What are the conditions of these people in jail and cor-rectional colonies;
- What functions are performed by these people in penal institutions;
- Why is the existence of this caste vital for the administra-tion of penitentiary facilities?

Part 1. Blatnoy, muzhik, kozyol, and petukh

How did the caste of ‘petukhs’ appear?

Let’s make a retrospective journey into history. The caste of so-called ‘*petukhs*’ is traditionally associated with homosexuality. And if you approach from this point of view, everything is simple: homosexuality in prisons has always existed, including tsarist prisons and the Gulag. Due to the extremely macho and homophobic nature of prison code (‘*ponyatiya*’) and convicts subculture, it becomes clear why a gay person in prison is automatically relegated to ‘downcasts’. Machismo is characterized by contempt for everything female, leveling of women to subhuman creatures that do not have the right to their own will. This attitude is transferred to homosexuals.

But the ‘downcasts’ only consist of homosexuals to a smaller degree. For the most part, the caste consists of people who have committed offenses

against the informal prison law – ‘*ponyatiya*’. It should be pointed out that ‘*petukhs*’ as a caste with strict rules of entry and getting out of it (or rather, the impossibility of getting out) appeared not so long ago. It was not, for example, inherent to tsarist prisons and the Gulag. According to the sources I am familiar with, the emergence of a caste of prison untouchables (which also includes homosexuals) relates to the late Soviet period.

Some researchers believe that the emergence of a caste of prisoners whom you may not touch with hands is a reaction of the crime lords to ‘Bitches wars’¹. To save themselves, the crime lords had to invent an alternative to murder as punishment of the guilty.

1 A turf war, occurred within the Soviet labor camp system between 1945 and around 1953 as a result of participating of many of the GULAG prisoners in World War 2 on the side of Soviet government. When returned into camps, such a prisoners were strongly condemned by the criminal hardliners (so called Thieves in Law) who reject any collaboration with the authorities. The Russian word ‘*suka*» (literally: bitch) specifically refers to a person from the criminal world who had cooperated with law enforcement or the government.

Thus, along with the suki involvement in the Soviet military, an internal prison war started between the military veterans and the ‘old-school» leaders of the Russian criminal underground. Many prisoners were killed in the Bitch Wars. Prison authorities turned a blind eye, since prisoner deaths reduced the overall prison population.

Others write that this was a reaction to the overcrowding of pre-trial detention centres: in a situation of overpopulation and being in plain view of other inmates 24/7 the most effective and severe form of punishment would be universal contempt and ostracism, an extreme form of ignoring.

About '*masti*' (castes) – a rundown

Historically, there have been only three '*masti*' (castes, or lifestyles) in the criminal world: a thief '*vor*', a bloke '*muzhik*', a brat '*petukh*'. In this hierarchy, you can descend from the highest (*vor*) to the lowest (*petukh*). You can't work your way up the caste ladder. In the modern criminal subculture of Belarus, prisoners are divided into somewhat different castes, namely: a crime lord '*blatnoy*', a bloke '*muzhik*', a jackass '*kozyol*', a brat '*petukh*'.

Blatnoy is a professional criminal who lives by conducting a criminal business on the outside. His mission is to promote the 'thieves' idea', wherever he is, to establish 'backdoor' (encourage corruption of correctional administrators), transfer the life of prisoners from the line of official rules and concepts into the law of thieves ('*ponyatiya*'), etc.

According to the '*ponyatiya*', only they have the right to classify a prisoner as a downcast. However, due to the fact that not all Belarusian correctional colonies have *blatnoys* ('thieves' movement' of Belarus, in general, is in a state of decay), this rule is not always followed, that's why downcast downgrade is done by anyone: operating officer, '*kozyol*' or sometimes simply by '*muzhiks*' after a collective decision.

Muzhiks is the main part of the prison population. '*Muzhik*' is not nosy, he works, is not interested in anything, except for how to leave on parole. He is in a situation of a 'cross-command' of several forces: *blatnoys* (if any), *kozyols* and prison administration staff.

Kozyol(activist)isaprisoneropenlycollaborating with the administration. It is usually a convict with a long term of imprisonment. Administration gives him duties and some power over other inmates. The amount of this power depends on the degree of correction officers' laziness. I know some cases where '*kozyols*' filed a violation report on the other prisoners and administration officials just signed it.

Often '*kozyol*' is allowed to beat other prisoners to maintain subordination. And, of course, quite officially '*kozyol*'s' duty is to snitch on other

prisoners. In one penal colony, for example, one 'kozyol' put it badly: 'Trash-cops told me to keep an eye on you'. At least two more didn't come out, but performed their 'work' very actively.

In my own disciplinary case that led me being sent to prison the decision was made on the basis of a written testimony composed by my cellmate, which detailed how I was brought into the barrack, how I behaved, with whom I communicated, with whom I argued, what topics I discussed, etc.

There is a nuance

While discussing the '*petukh*' caste it should be noted that apart from it there is another related 'subcaste' – the so-called 'separated before clarification', those who are '*na kruzhek*' (on a mug).

The point is as follows: for example, there is a suspicion that someone had homosexual contacts on the outside, but there is no sufficient proof of this suspicion, there is only a rumour. In this case, until confirmation or refutation of this accusation will appear, the person is '*na kruzhek*': he eats separately from the rest and uses only his dishes (thence the origin of the term – 'to seat apart on a mug').

A person can be in this status for years, until a '*blatnoy*' ('kozyol' or operating officer – depending

on the penal institution) confirms the accusation, i.e. transfers him completely into the caste of ‘*petukhs*’ or disproves it, i.e. transfers him officially to ‘*muzhiks*’ caste.

The position of a person ‘*na kruzhke*’ is very close to the position of a ‘*petukh*’, but not equal to it. He can not drink tea with other inmates and has no voice, but no one can call him ‘*petukh*’.

This is the only case when it is possible to upgrade from a lower caste to the higher one. A prisoner ‘*na kruzhke*’ is in a kind of quarantine – in order to avoid physical contact with other convicts: what if he is ‘*petukh*’ and can ‘infect’ others. Everyone, who, for example, drinks tea with a ‘separated’ person, automatically gets the same status.

In other cases, ‘separated’ or people ‘*na kruzhke*’ are equal to the notion of ‘*petukhs*’, and it’s quite easy to fall into this status.

How one becomes a “*petukh*”

Here is an exhaustive list of cases in which a person is downgraded to ‘downcasts’ (‘into faggot zone’, ‘into harem’):

Passive homosexual contacts. Persons who admit having experienced of homosexual contact, forever receive the label of ‘*petukh*’, ‘*fag*’,

etc. Active homosexuality is however considered normal and is not viewed as homosexuality, it's a normal behavior. However, it is noteworthy that in the last ten years this concept has been changing. Those who have sex with '*petukhs*' are considered as suspicious.

I myself repeatedly heard the opinion, like – 'There is no difference who f*cks whom – both are fags'. But, of course, a person who was active in a homosexual intercourse can't be called '*petukh*'.

Any non-traditional sexual relations with a woman. If the prisoner admits having performed cunnilingus or if she was performing a fellatio on him and then he kissed her, or was eating/drinking from the same dish – he is a '*petukh*'.

Naturally, it is almost impossible to learn about this against the will of the person. So in most cases, people fall into the 'fag zone' after their own revelation. You have to understand that no one has the right to inquire about your sexual life by threats or trickery. About it, by the way, in the 1990s there was a special message, '*progon*' (a kite, containing innovation in rules) from the thieves, who tried to decrease an oversized amount of '*petukhs*' in prisons.

In some way, prison staff is trying to deal with this problem. For example, in Zhodino jail before

a person was sent into a cell, the operating officer would instruct him, 'Remember, you never sucked a dick or ate a pussy!'

This also includes communication with homosexuals on the outside. If someone suddenly mentions that his friend is gay, that person immediately is considered a 'petukh'.

Any contacts with excrements/urine and contents of dumpster. A man splashed with urine or one who put his hands into the toilet automatically becomes a 'petukh'. For this reason, for example, plumbers are considered 'separated' in most prisons.

There is a well-known incident from Ivatsevichi colony No. 5 that could be a good example. In one of the sections there was a supply clerk, 'zavkhoz' (the main 'kozyol' in a section – a person who controls conditions in a section and is a right hand man of the administration), who for a long time had severely bullied one guy, abusing him verbally in every way possible. In revenge, that guy splashed the 'zavkhoz' with a jar of urine right during the morning check in front of the line of inmates. Of course, the guy was beaten and put in the de-seg. In theory, the fate of the 'zavkhoz' was foregone, but the prison staff intervened with the situation.

Probably, 'zavkhoz' was a 'valuable asset' for the administration. They announced to convicts that 'zavkhoz' was splashed with ... green tea. And those who would call him a 'petukh', would be beaten. Anyway, almost no one spoke with 'zavkhoz' ever again. And the guy was transferred to another prison.

I also personally knew a 'petukh' who fell into this caste because his head was struck against the toilet bowl during a fight in a youth colony.

As for the dumpsters, people can fall into downcasts when they want to smoke too much and search for cigarette butts in a dumpster.

This also should include such cases as unintentional touching of someone's genitals, for example, when slipping in a shower room.

To be honest, it should be pointed out that an exception sometimes is made for people with health problems (depending on the sanity of the decision-makers). For example, if a man has urinary incontinence, he will not be categorised as a 'petukh'.

Performance of any 'petukh's' work. Strictly 'petukh's' types of work are cleaning of toilets (this applies to the penal colony; in pretrial custody jail or prison any prisoner can clean the toilet in his cell), in some colonies –

cleaning of wash basins, as well as taking out the garbage. Doing these actions automatically relegates the person to 'petukh' caste.

Here's an example that happened in Mogilev colony No. 15, when I was there. A man was standing at a check line. Suddenly he really wanted to go to the toilet. He ran, as fast as he could, but did not make it – he shitted himself before reaching the toilet. Perhaps, being a shy and conscientious person, he decided to clean after himself. He took a broom, a rag... This was seen by some prisoners who called 'zavkhoz' as a witness, who verified the transfer to the downcasts.

Informal rules prohibiting cleaning of toilets is very convenient for the prison staff when they need to put any prisoner to the de-seg.

Every section has an official schedule of cleaning that, of course, doesn't take into account the caste system. At the same time, everybody knows that only 'petukhs' clean the toilet. Political prisoner *Igor Olinevich* was many times put in the punishment cell for refusing to clean toilets. For sure, any prisoner in his right mind would prefer serving any amount of days in a tiny cold room without personal belongings to becoming a 'petukh'. Prison staff know this perfectly well and gladly use such a convenient tool for pressure on the undesirable.

A similar incident happened to me in Gorky colony No. 9. Soon after I had made my time once again in the de-seg, I was approached by the section warden. He said that that day I was on duty to clean the washbasin and take out the garbage. I did some asking around beforehand and found out that in this prison only '*petukhs*' can clean the washbasin. Probably, the section warden thought I did not know that and would go to clean the washbasin. So, ceremoniously, he gathered half of the prison administration and local '*kozyols*' as witnesses, he pointed to a broom and a rag offering me to perform the 'scheduled duty'.

Naturally, I refused, and then he said in a grave tone, that there will be a document drawn up about my refusal to perform the duty, and soon I again went to warm the desks in my beloved de-seg cell.

Pedophiles almost always fall in the 'harem'. People say that in prison rapists are always raped, but they're not. Some prisoners can refuse to drink tea with some rapists, but nothing more. As for pedophiles, they have a more unenviable fate.

Until very recently, they were forced to be transferred to '*petukh*' caste ever in custody, without even waiting for the verdict. However,

the spirit of the times and the trend of ‘everything under the law’ take their toll. I myself have seen at least two pedophiles who were not ‘separated’ and lived almost the same as others. Of course, they were as quiet as lambs and not every convict allowed them to sit on his bunk or even to speak to them. But there is a tendency, especially in first-time offenders’ prisons.

The ‘harem’ receives everyone who spent some time in a cell with ‘petukhs’. The exact period of time varies. Sometimes it’s an hour, sometimes it is a day. According to ‘ponyatiya’, if someone enters into such a cell, one should make the ‘petukhs’ themselves ask for changing their cell and ‘muzhik’ should stay. But it is clear that physically it’s almost impossible.

Any man who had a physical (except sexual) contact with a ‘petukh’ or used his personal belongings is transferred to downcasts. In practice, it looks like this: picking up ‘petukh’s’ dishes or eating from them by mistake, using ‘petukh’s’ personal hygiene items, hugging or shaking hands, putting on his clothes (intentionally or unintentionally) and having a tea with a ‘petukh’ automatically qualifies you for this caste.

Giving something to a '*petukh*' is possible. Taking something from him leads to becoming a '*petukh*'.

However, these rules have some easings, especially in high-security colonies. For example, '*petukhs*' can wash clothes of a '*muzhik*', a '*petukh*' is allowed to sit on '*muzhik's*' bunk and so on.

Often people write or say that convicts can be transferred to downcasts for any misdeeds against prisoner's etiquette. Previously it happened, but not now. At least, I haven't seen anything like that.

The one who steals from other prisoners, can be called a '*rat*' and snubbed, the one who turned state's evidence in court may be called a '*suka*' (bitch) behind his back, and so on, but the transfer into downcasts due to such violation is a relic of the days when thieves' code was still strong in Belarusian prisons.

Thus, the concept of 'the contact' ('*zashkvar*') is something akin to ritual blot of the Jews, Muslims, and Parsis. The characteristic features of custom are irrationality and superstitious fear of the 'impure'. But if according to the Torah, a person who touches, for instance, carrion, will be 'unclean until the evening', according to the prison code, the man splashed with urine will be a '*petukh*' for the rest of his life, even if he is released and goes back to prison after 30 years.

Part 2: Thieves code (*'ponyatiya'*) in support of the state

Conditions of 'petukhs' in prisons

What is the life of a '*petukh*' in prison? In a nutshell, it is an absolute sheer hell.

According to '*ponyatiya*', a '*petukh*' has no rights. He has no right to argue, to retort, to defend his dignity because it is believed that he has no dignity. Others can beat, humiliate and mock him.

When an ordinary prisoner and a '*petukh*' walk along the hall in the barracks, the latter is obliged to lean against the wall, in order to avoid touching the other prisoner, otherwise, he may be beaten.

'*Petukhs*' do all the dirty work: washing the toilets (imagine what it means to clean 8-10 toilet seats in a section of a hundred people), taking out the trash and that sort of thing. Some '*petukhs*' provide sexual services to other convicts in exchange for tea and cigarettes (although I must say that in colonies where I was, prison staff fight against this, and if they find a '*petukh*' and his client having sex, both will be placed in solitary).

'*Petukhs*' get female names, prisoners refer to them with 'she' or 'baby'. Frankly speaking, it's pretty savage and sickening to watch how

young guffawing prisoners call, for example, a 60-year-old toothless grandpa 'Alenka' or 'Marina' (Russian female names).

'*Petukhs*' are never, even for a moment, allowed to forget who they are. They enter the dining room last, they are the last to wash in the shower room. In a club (the room for watching TV) they have a separate bench in the most uncomfortable place. The phrase 'Get the fuck outta here!' towards them is something quite familiar and common. One convict persistently argued with me that '*Petukhs are not people*'.

However, prison staff have even worse attitude to '*petukhs*' than inmates. Inspectors and often officers in every possible way disparage, publicly abuse, threaten and also can beat them.

Being powerless people with broken will they even less than ordinary prisoners fight for their rights. As a result – more than half of suicides that have happened during my presence in prisons and jails, were committed by '*petukhs*', despite the fact that this caste is not more than 3-5% of the prison's population.

Tellingly, the situation in pre-trial facilities is not better, where '*petukhs*' stay in special cells. At 'Volodarka' (pre-trial facility in Minsk) '*petukhs*' are held in cell 70. I heard from people,

who have long lived in the neighborhood of this cell, that its inhabitants cut their veins almost daily.

What do they do?

Life 'at the bottom of the heap', constant hatred and humiliation from almost anyone can hardly yield a highly moral creature. According to my personal observations, most of '*petukhs*' are totally unprincipled, low-down people, ready to do anything for their own benefit. Though, of course, these characters are not rare among prisoners in general, among '*petukhs*' this is probably much more common.

The vast majority of '*petukhs*' work for the administration: snitching, performing 'operative tasks', provoking, etc. The need to somehow survive in the over-aggressive and hostile prison atmosphere pushes them to ally with the strongest party – prison staff. Therefore, most of the functions that '*petukhs*' perform anyway are imposed on them by an operating officer.

The official duties of '*petukhs*' include cleaning toilets (no one except them will do this) and taking out the trash. Many of them earn their living by cleaning the rooms. '*Petukhs*' are divided into 'working' and 'non-working'. The

former are those, who for a fee (tea, cigarettes, sweets) provide sexual services to other inmates. The latter are those who don't, and this means they can not be forced.

Many believe that a person becomes a '*petukh*' through rape in prison or in jail. 15-20 years ago it was true. But today it basically does not occur in Belarusian prisons. At least, I do not know of any such a case, and none of those, who was inside with me, told me anything of this nature. Also, there were no cases of rape of '*petukhs*' during my prison time.

Today's prison is much more under the control of the administration than before, and a raped '*petukh*' can write a statement against the rapist and his sentence will be then increased.

What is the benefit for the administration?

Surely you have a question: why the state, and, in particular, prison administration allows the savage medieval caste system with its untouchables, servants, and prostitutes to exist in prisons? Indeed, it's inhumane, cruel and, finally, illegal, according to the penitentiary internal rules of conduct, all prisoners should toe the same line and any caste division is out of the question.

Can prison staff stop it and recover albeit strict and tough, but still discipline?

The answer is simple: they don't need it.

For quite a long time spent in penal institutions I was in many places and saw a lot of people. I was in four prisons and in three colonies, talked to simple '*muzhiks*', and 'thieves', bandits, drug addicts, 'traders' and '*polozhenecs*'², swindlers and murderers, '*kozyols*' and even '*petukhs*' and, of course, had communicated quite a lot with prison staff.

Reflecting a lot on the establishment of Belarusian penal system, I came to a firm conclusion that thieves and police system of prison management are two pillars that support each other.

The informal system of '*ponyatiya*' invented by thieves and official internal rules of conduct today are more likely mutually integrated, rather than in a state of war and conflict.

Yes, indeed, prison officials forcibly cleaned up the practice of '*ponyatiya*' from those rules that prevent controllability and create inconvenience for them. Otherwise, the world of professional criminals and the Ministry of Internal Affairs

2 A '*blatnoy*', appointed by the Thief-in-law to execute certain responsibilities in a prison or penal colony.

world get on well with each other. They get from each other what they need: the prison staff – peace in a facility, no incidents, and control (why should they have to control hundreds of prisoners, if it is possible to control one *‘blatnoy’* / *‘kozyol’*, who keeps others at bay?). Thieves / *‘kozyols’* receive privileges and power. Everybody is happy. Except, of course, *‘muzhiks’* who, as usual, is a patsy in the middle, and is, de facto, in the situation of double subordination.

Many of the prisoners who have served time for more than ten years, and saw how all Belarusian prisons went from ‘black’ (under prisoners control) to ‘red’ (under administration) between about 2005 and 2010, told me openly, ‘Now it’s the same as before. The only difference is that instead of the thieves there are *‘kozyols’*. If earlier *‘blatnoys’* had vodka and mobile phones, now activists have it. If earlier for screw-ups a *‘muzhik’* was beaten by thieves, now it is done by *‘kozyols’*’.

Tellingly, even faces of such informal leaders are often the same. During the active ‘breaking’ of prison and it’s reshaping, where from do you think the operating officers took loyal and dedicated activists – *‘zavkhoze’* and room orderlies, ready to fulfill any order? They were recruited from yesterday’s thieves, who quickly betrayed their criminal idea, because they were threatened

with, for example, being sent to prison or loss of privileges, or just were put in a punishment cell a few times.

As a result, today Belarusian prisons are run by the ad-ministration together with prisoners who ‘firmly mended their ways’, but every inch of whose body is covered by criminal tattoos and whose fists are pumped with Vaseline³.

Despite the formal contradiction in functions, the confluence of the criminal world and correctional staff is noticeable not only institutionally, but also on the linguistic level.

The officers use prison slang not less actively than convicts. As I wrote, *‘petukhs’* are snubbed and humiliated by prison staff worse than by criminals. They even have their own ‘separated’ among prison workers, who are outcasts in a circle of colleagues.

When I was in Mogilev colony No. 15, there was a ‘separated’ inspector. Colleagues didn’t drink tea with him, he was the only one who could frisk *‘petukhs’*. And such cases are not unique: in Novosady colony No. 14, according to my cellmate, there was even a separated officer, because his colleagues have found out that he has

3 Hooligans and criminals use to inject vaseline in their fists to harden them: while injected, it protects the knuckles and makes the punch harder.

‘wrong’ sex with his wife. As a result, they stopped drinking tea with him and began to defiantly despise him, moreover, even prisoners snubbed this officer with impunity. And there are a lot of such examples.

Interestingly, many prisoners on the wave of regime toughening and relative improvement of *‘petukh’s’* conditions (about 20 years ago they were beaten more often, and could also be raped) have expressed to me the opinion that soon *‘petukhs will not exist, because everyone will be forced to the clean toilets’*. They often added, that authorities need to *‘look decent in front of Europe’* (yes, there were also these kinds of political analysts). However, it seems to me, that this will not happen in the near future. The reason is the same - the existence of *‘petukh’s’* caste significantly facilitates prison controllability.

Without any doubt, the administration of Belarusian pri-sons could force all prisoners to clean toilets and mix people at tables in the canteen regardless of caste.

There will be no riots or rebellions against it. This innovation will be fraught maximum with the consequences of like a few dozens of diehard supporters of *‘ponyatiya’*, who will be sent to prison. Most prisoners in Belarus form such a downtrodden and speechless mass, that

they could be easily forced to do anything. And if they are offered prospects of a parole for cleaning toilets, they'll race each other at cleaning.

However, as we have seen, the administration doesn't move on with doing so.

Another important point: the existence of this caste gives the prison staff an invaluable assistance in pressing on prisoners who refuse to obey.

In every colony and prison, there are always individuals who refuse to play by the rules established by the police. Either these are antisocial persons that try to live strictly according to the 'ponyatiya'), or prisoners who try to defend their rights, for example, complaining to various authorities, or those who will be persecuted in prison only due to their status, such as political prisoners.

So, many people from these categories are no longer intimidated by the deprivation of parcels and visits, punishment cells or cell-type regime, or transfer to prison or the art. 411 article of the Criminal Code (deliberate disobedience to the lawful demands of the administration of correction facility). The question is what do you do with them? And here comes the last argument – 'petukh's' caste. And then even those who are not afraid of the isolation ward, or batons, of course, will think twice. This is

because life in this caste is the worst thing that can happen to a prisoner. A man with dignity can't stay in a group with this status, it becomes almost impossible. And there is no way out of this caste.

I conversed with a former prisoner of Bobruisk colony No. 2, who got a response from the governor to his demand to comply with the law and non-infringement of his rights: 'Have you forgotten where the harem is?' And this is not an exception.

It's needless to say about the use of this tool against political prisoners. I myself know about at least three cases in which political prisoners were transferred into the '*petukh's*' caste simply for the fact that they are political prisoners.

In all three cases, the operative combination was very similar. After arrival of political prisoner to a colony they find a respected convict ('*blatnoy*' or '*kozyol*'), who raises against the political prisoner an accusation of a 'screwup': that he sat previously in the same cell with a 'downcast' or drank from the '*petukh's*' mug, or he dealt with a '*petukh*' outside. Naturally, this accusation has nothing to do with reality. But, with a wave of a wand, one or more witnesses appear and confirm: 'Yes, he drank, I saw it myself' or 'Yes, he dealt with a fagot on the outside, I saw it myself!', although

the ‘accused’ doesn’t know these people. And now the decision can be made, everything according to ‘*ponyatiya*’!

The result: the political prisoner is transferred into the ‘*petukh*’s’ caste, the actor (‘*blatnoy*’ or ‘*kozyol*’) gets a gratification like a visit or a parcel, and the cunning operating officer, who developed the whole plan, receives administrative carrot from higher-ups.

Fortunately, I avoided this fate, although attempts, as I wrote above, were made. However, obviously, the administration had no specific ambition to transfer me into the ‘harem’, otherwise, they would certainly have done so.

Such unanimity of informal prison elites and administration against political prisoners, allows me once again to say that the hierarchical punitive system always operates in unity when they want to suppress and push out alien elements – potential rebels able to stand up for their rights.

And, of course, we can compare it with the analogy of 1930-1940s, when criminals have taken an active part in the elimination of ‘Trotskyists’, ‘betrayers of the people’ and other ‘58th’ (an article “Counterrevolutionary activity” of USSR Criminal Code) (see. V. Shalamov ‘*Zhulnicheskaya krov*’, E. Eppbaum ‘*Gulag*’, Solzhenitsyn ‘*The Gulag Archipelago*’, book 3).

Yes, these two heads of punitive hydra can sometimes squabble among themselves, but, nevertheless, they need each other, and at a time when they will need to destroy people like us – they will certainly go together.

Is there a way out?

Here, I think it would be appropriate to give some advice for what to do if you're in prison and you see that an attempt is being made to transfer you to the '*petukh*' caste for disobedience or for 'political' status (which happens more often).

First and foremost, you should change your attitude to what is happening. All of us, men, have been taught that 'fagot' is insulting and disgusting, that it's a shame to be so. And now a group of adult and kind of sane men tells you that you are one. First of all, you need to understand that your current situation has no shame and you should not blame yourself. You are not a pedophile, not a rapist. You are not necessarily gay. It's just that feral caste norms prevailing in prison are being used against you in order to break your will and lower your status in the eyes of others.

What to do?

If the process has not yet entered irreversible stage, for example, you are thrown into a '*petukh's*' cell or convicts publicly provoke you by asking tricky questions, it makes sense to struggle till the end – fight, commit acts of self-harm, provoke any conflicts, but to get out of this situation, to show your unstoppable determination.

If the moment is gone, and you find yourself in this caste, you have to request the administration for your legitimate right to personal safety (Article 11 of the Criminal Executive Code of Belarus) – transfer to protective custody (usually in solitary confinement). According to this article, 'in case of threats to personal safety of the convicted person, they are entitled to apply for personal security protection to any official body of institution which carries out criminal sentences. In this case, the official body shall immediately take measures for personal protection of the convicted person'.

I don't know a single case when this convict's demand was denied. However, everything is possible, and it may happen that for stronger effect the person who was declared 'separated' and demanded to be removed from common barracks, is intentionally left there. For a night, for example, so that he can experience all the

beauties of '*petukh's*' life. In this case, you need to be ready for humiliation, for a fight, for anything. Again, this is the situation when you should use extreme measures in the form of self-harm or self-protection in every possible way.

It is worth to remember that the more problems you create for the administration, the faster they will provide you with security because prison administration does not have a goal of the physical destruction of political prisoners, it is only about breaking them down morally. They don't need a corpse or a disabled person in the colony.

Of course, it should be understood, that a request to the administration to put you in solitary is a 'screwup' in terms of '*ponyatiya*'. Such people are called 'charged in', 'locked down', etc. According to the same '*ponyatiya*', if you think that you were 'separated' 'with no code' (i.e. unfair), you should find a superior in the criminal hierarchy ('enforcer' or thief-in-law) and ask him for appeal, and don't ask the administration to put you in protective custody.

You decide yourself what to do. However, my opinion is: an appeal to '*ponyatiya*' that is itself a tool of dissenters breaking, is at least short-sighted. And operating officers will always find an approach, the easy way or the hard way, to

any criminal decision-maker. And between saving your destiny or his own well-being, he unequivocally will choose the latter.

The very first thing to do in such cases is to make public what happened to you, inform the lawyer and relatives, so the information gets into the media. They are still a kind of shield for political prisoners from outright tyranny, so it is necessary to speak frankly and openly about everything that happened to you; talk without shame about castes and '*ponyatiya*' and provocations of prison staff. Indeed, administration will put pressure on prisoners in this way, just playing on their male feelings and sense of shame for the fact that 'now I'm like a fagot'.

Thereby the vast majority of similar stories that take place not only with political prisoners never come out. People are simply ashamed to talk about them, by that reproducing the vicious circle of silence and allowing prison staff to continue using informal prison rules for pressure on the undesirable.

We can stop it, only if we start to talk about the problem out loud, conquering this absolutely unreasonable shame and fear.

Like I said, I wasn't in such a situation, but I considered all the time the likelihood that I will be put in 'harem' due to KGB orders. And

by long reflection, observation, and analysis of experiences of others I came to the conclusion that in that case, I will behave exactly as described above.

I would like to conclude this text with something optimistic and life-affirming. But reality dictates a slightly different tone. The number of people ending up in prison for their beliefs is gradually increasing and with it grows the pressure in prison. An important part of this pressure is precisely the caste system and informal hierarchy, which I described above.

It is not an individual, but a mass system of ‘practicing’ on special categories of prisoners being tested on drug-addicted convicts. An innovation was introduced in correctional colonies: the preventive registering of ‘extremists’ – they are forced to wear a yellow label. It is logical to assume, that in the light of the radical deterioration of the socio-economic situation in the country after they have created separated colonies for the drug addicts, they will separate the politicals.

All in all, I think that all of us, those, who stand today for changes and the overthrow of the dictator, should cast off illusions and realize that it would not be better and will only be harder. Of course, the prison administration will continue

to use pressure against political prisoners by '*ponyatiya*'. This tool is easy to use and has repeatedly proved its effectiveness.

Only the demolition of the archaic caste system can change the situation for the better and as a first step, we should start with demolition of silence and taboo on discussion of the topic in society.

12-16 June 2016



THE SMELL

Every prison has its own smell.

When you tumble out of a congested meat wagon with your sacks, the first thing you see are the inquisitive mugs of the guards. Reflexively, your pores start to absorb the smell of the prison that is going to become home for you for the next months or years.

Volodarka¹ is saturated with anxiety.

Starting from 'cabinets'² to the 'submarine'³, from the tempo rary detention unit to dungeons, from recreation yard to the infirmary, from new blocks to 'the red block' - its concrete walls, tiled here and there, are breathing with apprehensive attitude. Anxiety over your fate, insecurity and frightening suspense overwhelm.

Where will the screw locate me? To the 'blatnoy'⁴ house? Or to the 'muzhiks' one? Or, perhaps, to the pressure-house⁵?

1 Pretrial custody in Minsk named after the street it is situated in (Volodar-sky St.) Before it was a castle.

2 A hall with cabinets for interrogations.

3 A hall in the pretrial custody.

4 Cell of crime lords. See more on prison caste system in "The Untouchables in the Prison Hierarchy".

5 A cell with bullies instructed by cops to get tough with a new inmate to make him testify or make his life unbearable.

The investigator has come! What's going to happen? A face-to-face interrogation? Has a sidekick started to snitch on me? Or maybe it's time to familiarise myself with materials of the case.

The lawyer! Why so early? It was not so long ago he visited me! Is anything wrong with the relatives?

Custody prison No. 8, aka Zhodino, aka Black stork (the prison got this romantic nickname, I suppose, from the cops themselves by analogy with the Russian Black Swan to add more poignancy and importance) smells of fear. It's penetrated the foot-worn stairs, the scrubbed floor, the cells of concrete and metal, the walls painted beige and the heads of the inmates. For 24 hours a day this place is absorbing the tumults and anxiety of those who are trapped in here.

Inmates are beaten up in ZhodiNo. Block wardens and the 'reserve' beat people for refusal to do the splits, for a rude reply back to the screw. The prison operatives beat for unwillingness to make a full confession or declaring hunger strikes. Zhodino is a 'red'⁶ prison. In the early 2000s here they broke down crime bosses and all kinds of

6 Prisons were divided into the 'red' (run by prison authorities) and the 'black' (administered by inmates). Now all prisons in Belarus are red.

prison gangsters. Their blood still smells like fear; it poisons present-day inmates and intoxicates the screws with permissiveness.

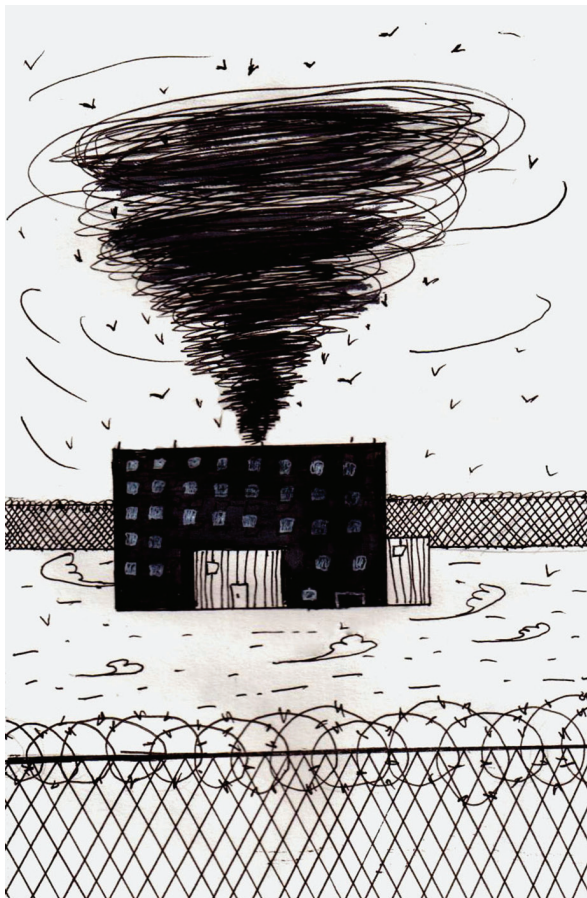
Mogilev gaol, officially Prison No. 4, smells of sleep. The staff are quiet and even-tempered (though there are always exceptions), the halls are silent, nobody is hurrying anywhere: a sleepy and phlegmatic feeling hangs in the air. About an hour before the lights-out they spread a long carpet in every hallway of the prison - to damp the steps of the screw. I was not able to figure it out for myself why this is done: to not disturb the inmates' sleep with their steps, or so that the inmates don't hear the screw sneaking up to the door and listening in to what the inmates are talking about in the cell?

The wing is so quiet at night that while laying on a bunk you can hear the screw make a tea. Hear him boil the electric kettle, pour the water into the cup, put some sugar, stir it... take a sip...

It's interesting, because in Mogilev they also beat the cons, because even there someone is waiting for a new sentence. But still the atmosphere is completely different. Maybe it's because half of the population there are people with a 10-year or more stretch? They are fed up with being afraid, there is no reason for anxiety, there is nothing to wait for...

There is a TV show called 'The Psychic Challenge'. One day watching the magicians passing with their hands and mysteriously squinting into the distance, I thought, 'What if they could see the vibes of these buildings and places! Then over any of these buildings - Pishchalauski Castle, a former mental asylum converted into a Mogilev prison, the prison in Zhodino - over the places where the evil will of people who have once done harm to their loved ones meets the evil will of the state system, synergetically multiplying each other - they would see a giant, covering half of the sky, a black swirl which is sucking life out of those who happen to appear under it.

July 2016



I wrote this short essay after about three months of staying in a solitary cell of SHU in the Shklov colony. The foundation for it became widely-known in the past book 'Legends and Myths of Ancient Greece' by Nikolay Kun, which expounds a number of myths from Ancient Greece, though in a rather truncated and sometimes censored way.

Staying in solitary leads to all the energy of a person being directed inwards, as a general rule, at the thinking process. Not being able to discuss their thoughts with anyone, an inmate pours them out on paper. This was my experience, too: considering the lack of intellectual communication or a possibility to share my ideas, I formulated them in some articles or notes killing two birds with one stone: I didn't let my brain decay and vented the longing for activity.

Of course, this essay is not an in-depth research, it's just a short analytical sketch, a reflection on what I read. And even though the theme of prison is not directly addressed in it, I decided to include it in this storybook. Some of the thoughts expressed here may be of interest to some readers. And let professional historians forgive me for my somewhat liberal use of mythological material.

REBELLIONS AGAINST THE DIVINE HIERARCHY IN ANCIENT GREEK MYTHOLOGY

INTRODUCTION

Ancient Greek mythology, being a religion at the same time, undoubtedly exercised ideological functions, too - the same as religion does in any class society: justifying social inequality, sustaining the existing state order, reinforcing hierarchy in the minds of people.

A lot has been said and written about how Greek Olympus mirrors society with its system of class domination. Similar to worldly governors, gods of the Olympus demand unquestionable recognition of their superiority, as well as deference and material sacrifice from the people. In the case of disobedience, the person will face dreadful scourge. On the Olympus itself, there is no equality either. There are principal gods and subordinate ones. On the top of the pyramid resides Zeus.

But, like in the real world, in Greek mythology, there is always a black sheep, a 'disruptive element' who is able to destroy the eternal order. In our case, it's either the one who declares that they are equal to gods and aren't afraid of them

because of self-righteousness and vanity, or the one who demands social equality because of their craving for justice. Both of these things make a horrible blasphemy by contemporary standards. Any rebellion, be it the uprising of the masses defending their rights, or a separate undertaking of a lowborn power maniac with inadequate demands beneath them is to be suppressed, and the insurgent should be punished. However, the sheer fact of a presence of such a narrative in Greek mythology attests to an ineradicable, centuries-long craving for casting off the lack of freedom and yoke of oppression, as well as whatever divine halo this yoke is crowned with.

Thus, in Greek mythology, we can easily find events or characters that reject the supreme authority of gods and their demigod relatives that usually made worldly governors. Let's consider the most distinctive myths around this issue.

THE SONS OF ALOEUS

Otus and Ethialtes were the sons of Aloeus who, in his turn, was born by Poseidon and Canace. The two sons were conceited and were not willing to conform to anyone. From childhood, they were brave and strong and were noted for their unusual height. They started their confrontation

with gods with chaining Ares, the god of war and putting him in the dungeon. Ares languished in the dungeon for thirty long months until he was released by Hermes.

Growing bold, Otus and Ethialtes began to threaten other gods:

‘Just let us gain strength and we will pile one upon the other the Olympus, Pelion, and Ossa, rise up to you and abduct Hera and Artemis!’

The response to these earnest threats were the arrows of Apollo that struck the rebels. It should be pointed out specifically that the sons of Aloeus belonged to the mortals.

Otus and Ethialtes died relatively fast and as we will see further, compared to other disobedients, they were blessed.

ARACHNE

Arachne was a Lydian weaver whose works were famous all around. Once in the thick of vanity, she declared:

‘Let the Pallas Athena herself come and contend with me! She will not be able to defeat me’.

Athena came to Arachne under the guise of a crooked old wife, but before punishing the weaver she decided to stay with disciplinary measures,

namely, she advised Arachne to contend only with mortals and begged Athena faster to forgive her arrogant words. Arachne didn't take the old wife's advice, she rudely interrupted her and only complained:

‘Why doesn't Athena come?’

Then the goddess assumed her real appearance. Nymphs and Lydian women immediately bowed before Athena and praised her. But Arachne acted differently - she ignored the goddess without rendering her any honours and just insisted on the immediate start of the contest. Consider that there were no judges on it, they were not elected or appointed, though what could have been done without them in this situation.

Athena wove a canvas, portraying her and Poseidon's argument over the ascendancy over Attica. In the corners of the canvas she depicted gods punishing people for defiance (what a hint!). Arachne, in her turn, wove on the canvas the scenes of gods' life where gods were actually presented as possessed with human passions (and let's note, that gods really were like that) and didn't show any proper respect to them. It's reported that Arachne's work was highly competitive with Athena's work in perfection. So what should the goddess do? To admit her defeat? Naturally, it was unthinkable. The decision of Athena was as simple as top-down

governance. She hit Arachne with a shuttle and tore apart the weaver's canvas. Unable to endure the shame, Arachne wove a rope, made a noose and hung herself. However, vindictive Athena found that even such an outcome was not enough. She took Arachne out of the noose, animated her and turned into a spider, thus devoting her to eternal weaving.

The whole myth is just a quintessence of the blatant injustice based on 'natural' inequality. Think about it: Arachne, by honestly challenging Athena, believed there should be unified 'rules of the game' for gods and people, and that she, the mortal, could accrue victory if she objectively prevails. Such a view of life assumes a bigger trust to the counterpart, an honest game since, as we remember, there were no judges at the contest. Thus, the act of Athena looks false-hearted and traitorous which didn't actually embarrass her in the slightest. The goddess lucidly showed Arachne and everyone else that she was not Rousseau or Voltaire and the principle of equality before the law was unfamiliar to her. But she generally accepted the sword law. Since using violence in the situation when her competitiveness didn't lose, to say the least, Athena accentuated the inherent, incontestable inequality of gods and mortals. This myth and its contents seem to

assert: ‘Let you be as wise as Solomon, let the right be on your side, gods will anyway tread you to pieces just because they are gods’.

PROMETHEUS

Prometheus is a titan, the son of goddess Themis. He used to be Zeus’s ally in the battle for power on Olympus but fell into the cloud-assembler’s disgrace for adherence to the ideals of humanism. Living on the Olympus in the atmosphere of constant celebration, with no want for anything, he took pity on the mortals. Seeing the suffering to which they were condemned by gods, he stole fire from his friend Hephaestus’s smithy (the son of Zeus, by the way) and delivered it to the people. Moreover, after coming down to earth, Prometheus continued to provide aid to the mortals: he domesticated a wild bull, harnessed a horse to a cart, taught people how to craft, read, count, write and build ships, disclosed to them the force of herbs.

Let’s note that Prometheus didn’t just give people a one-time instrument that could make their lives easier, but helped them to harness the forces of nature that at that time were directly identified with the force of gods. By this, Prometheus made them much more

independent. Was it in Zeus's cards? Hardly so. His servants brought Prometheus to the cliff, and his friend Hephaestus was instructed to chain him to the rock and empale Prometheus's chest fastening him to the rock with a spike. Suffering from remorse but unable to go against his father's will, Hephaestus carries all this through.

But there is another aspect that is bothering Zeus and multiplying his anger and suspicion towards Prometheus. Prometheus knows the mystery: how and when Zeus is to be overthrown from the Olympus and lose his power. Zeus, naturally, intends to extort this secret from Prometheus.

One by one Prometheus is visited by various deities - Oceanus, the Oceanids, Hermes - who try in every way to persuade him to submit and share the mystery with Zeus. But Prometheus remains adamant. With Hermes he is specifically straightforward:

'I will not give up my grief for the slavish serving to Zeus. I'd better be chained to this rock than become a faithful servant of the despot Zeus. There is no execution, no tortures that he could use to frighten me and get a single word from my mouth!'

Well, if that isn't revolutionary, what is?

For this defiance, Zeus throws the cliff where Prometheus is tied to down to the eternal darkness, where he then spends centuries. Having raised him again, Zeus prepares a new challenge for Prometheus's revolutionary morale. Every day an eagle flies to the cliff and leaves only after pecking out his liver.

His liver grows back overnight, and the torture repeats in the morning. Meanwhile, the titans overthrown by Zeus during the fight for power have been forgiven and are brought back from the Tartarus to the surface as those who had acknowledged the authority of the cloud-assembler. In contrast, Prometheus stays adamant and proudly endures his suffering (it should be pointed out that the fate of ardent enemies of Zeus turned out to be more desirable than the lot of the out-of-favour ally...). His mother Themis and the hero Heracles come to him and all ask for one thing: to accept the electoral results... ugh, I mean, to acknowledge Zeus a supreme governor and reveal the Secret to him. Heracles treated Prometheus in a chivalrous manner: he killed the eagle who had been tormenting him for so long. Hermes flew from the Olympus immediately and yet again promised freedom to Prometheus in exchange for the Secret. And here something broke down inside the rebel. Prometheus told Zeus how to avoid the overthrow:

the Olympian alpha male just needed to stay away from the sea goddess Thetis since any son that is born to her will be more powerful than his father.

Thus Prometheus gained liberty in return of pursuance of Zeus's will.

The myth of Prometheus is noteworthy specifically for the motivation that inspired the hero to commit a crime against the divine order of governance. This is not the lust or rapture of valour of Otus and Ethialtes, nor the self-admiration caused by the extraordinary artistic skills of Arachne. In the case of Prometheus, the motivation is the living compassion, love to people, the feeling of justice and the rejection of slavery. And it doesn't matter that Prometheus has broken after long centuries, no longer able to endure the torture. I would double-down on the fact that being an immortal titan, he possessed everything. He was treated with affection by the governor and well-received on the highest levels of power. However, he sacrificed all this to ease the suffering of people in this world. I say it straight: Prometheus is the first known humanist.

THERSITES

The peak of the egalitarian episodes of Greek mythology, in my opinion, is the episode from Trojan cycles with a warrior named Thersites

in the lead role. This is not about an individual rebellion anymore, but about an attempt to raise a popular revolt. But first things first.

Let me remind you of the plot of the Trojan cycle: Paris, the son of King of Troy, visits a palace of the local king Menelaus in Laconia and is being received as an honourable guest. However, he insidiously takes away his wife from the palace, the beautiful Helen (a natural daughter of Zeus, by the way). Menelaus can't tolerate such humiliation and after consulting his brother Agamemnon, he decides to declare war to Troy to retaliate on Paris and get his wife back. He was able to engage in this campaign as headliners with almost the whole pantheon of contemporary heroes: the Ajax brothers, Odysseus, Achilles and many others. All of them came from the supreme aristocracy. They were sons or grandsons of kings, gods, and demigods - let's pay attention to this fact, it is extremely important. Apart from them, the campaign was supported by 100 thousand warriors, obviously, not aristocrats, but freemen and landlords. The siege of Troy lasted for 10 years. On the 10th year, the event in question actually happened.

Agamemnon decided to yet again attack Trojans by the walls of the town. However, before that, he wished to test his troops for loyalty. He

called a popular assembly of all the warriors he had and addressed them. He spoke about the hardships of war, the idleness of the siege and about the fact that the gods probably desire that the Greeks win. The reaction of warriors was immediate - like an insurgent sea, they dashed to the ships, glad of the opportunity to go back home. That figures: a simple man from Hellenic province hardly ever craved fighting and dying for the concerns of the heart of the local king.

And here, a well-known to us, Pallas Athena took the stage. An important point should be made: the myth of Troy is not a fairy-tale, not a fancy of the author, but rather a confabulated story because it is based on a true story despite the existence of fairy-tale characters. So we will look at what happened later in the chronicle of historical events.

So, having appeared before Odysseus, Pallas Athena told him to bring the warriors back as soon as possible. Odysseus didn't need to be asked twice. The king of Ithaca snatched away the scepter (the sign of supreme power) from Agamemnon and began to actively urge the warriors to come back to the assembly, so actively that the scepter went in a whirl over the backs and heads of the fugitives.

The author dissembles the fact as to whether there were victims of this 'urging', but I assume that without killing one of the several warriors

Odysseus could hardly stop such a mass of people. He was successful in it - the warriors returned to the assembly and calmed down, just Thersites alone didn't settle down and started to shout. Thersites, the author informs, always bravely spoke out against kings (to be fair, Thersites himself was related to Diomedes, the king of Argos). This time he pushed back against Agamemnon saying that he had already captured a lot of trophies and bond-maids, and it's time for him to be seated and for them, simple warriors, to go back home. Let Agamemnon fight against Troy alone! And now let's remember that most kings were related to gods and we'll realise how far Thersites went, against whom he raised his voice.

Generally, everything in the speech of Thersites was logical and fair, but from then on really strange things began. Odysseus comes to Thersites and says:

'Don't you dare, you fool, defame kings, don't you dare to speak about returning to your home town! If I ever hear again you, lunatic, defame king Agamemnon, let my head be cut off from my square shoulders, let them stop calling me the father of Telemachus, if I don't grab you, tear your clothes apart, beat you up and banish you from the popular assembly to the ships, and you will be crying in pain'.

In support of his words, Odysseus hit Thersites with a scepter on the back so that the latter's eyes flowed with tears.

Then, according to the author, everyone laughed loudly and said looking at Thersites:

'Odysseus has carried out a lot of gests in the committee and in battle, but this is the best of his exploits. How he restrained the wrangler! Now he will not dare to defame the kings favoured by Zeus anymore'.

Here, I believe, the author sins against the truth a lot, exposing all Greek warriors as hopeless idiots who don't have their own opinion. Consider this: only a few minutes ago the warriors were dashing to their ships forgetting about the 'kings favoured by Zeus', and just brutal force and the authority of Odysseus could get them back. And now thousands of warriors, who had just wished for doing what Thersites suggested, start to laugh at him though he expressed the aspirations of every and each of them. Let's not forget that often historical events in chronicles and myths are reshaped in order to please the ruling class, and in our case, to please the kings-noblemen and their relatives who would naturally be interested in demonising Thersites by exposing him as a freak, a wrangler who is beaten up just for fun. It's more likely that Odysseus's act was cheered and loudly praised by people like him:

kings, the blue blood of the Greek army and maybe his confidants from common soldiers. Simple warriors, I believe, were looking at the scene with sadness, but they didn't dare to openly support Thersites. Over nine years of the siege they got used to obeying to their leaders, moreover, they understood perfectly well that if there is a rebellion, Odysseus will be immediately supported by the top militaries. This is why common soldiers were looking at the humiliation of Thersites clenching their teeth with anger and fear, and not jovially laughing. This version is much more probable, in my opinion.

But the story of Thersites doesn't end there.

From the far-away Pontus, the Amazons came to help out the Trojans. The battle was boiling yet again, where women were fighting under the leadership of queen Penthesilea. In the heat of battle, she was killed by Achilles. Looking at Penthesilea, Achilles understands that he loves her and bows his head over the dead in sorrow. Here it would be great if Penthesilea opened her eyes full of passion and Achilles revealed a chest protection under her cyclas and kissed his lover amid the thickening combat. Sadly, Thersites brings rain on the parade again. Coming up to Achilles, he began to berate him (though it is not clear from the text what for), and then

probably decided to pique him in an extremely sophisticated way. He took a spear and pierced an eye of the dead Penthesilea. Having recovered from the shock, Achilles hit Thersites in the face so strongly that it killed him on the spot, ingloriously ending the life of this character who was thrown mud at by the author of the Trojan cycles.

Let's try to get an objective and common sense insight into what happened.

First of all, Achilles belonged to heroes-demigods and was vitally interested in the victory of Greeks over Troy. This victory gave him rich trophies (including slaves) and surely the expansion of his domain, saying nothing of the fame and prestige. Second of all, before Achilles joined the battle (he entered the battle when it was already on), the Amazons were seriously pressing the Greeks; the latter began to retreat and were almost pushed to their ships. They were so close to getting on those boats. And Achilles knew very well where they would have gone if they had boarded them. An extremely unpleasant situation was created for the leaders... The smallest spark, like the call of Thersites, was enough for the army to wave farewell to their chiefs - like, you fight yourselves, and we are going home. The precedent is fresh in the memory of Achilles. In

this situation, the aristocracy decided to stay one step ahead of themselves and in the confusion of the battle Achilles kills such an inconvenient fighter as Thersites since he can use the situation any moment and get his own back for the recent humiliation. However, an open murder of an equal to himself was formally inexcusable even for Achilles (later he even had to sail to Lesbos to clear himself from the abomination of the spilled blood by bringing sacrifices to Apollo and Artemis). The author of the myth-chronicle vitally needed to make a proper excuse to the murder, the same as Achilles himself would probably make among the aristocracy: lunatic Thersites was allegedly scoffing at the dead body... While in reality Achilles just seized (maybe even by prior arrangement with other aristocrats) the occasion that was ideally suited for the elimination of the dangerous rebel. I will not assert that this narrative is the only truth, but I think it's a viable option.

CONCLUSION

All heroes-rebels from the Greek myths, mortals, and non-mortals, have one thing in common: the all came to a sad end, in layman's terms. They were either forced to be in favour of gods' will and

just because of this, they were forgiven or were ruthlessly eliminated. None of them won this stand-off. And this is rather consistent, and could not have been otherwise - in a Greek myth (and, perhaps, in the conscience of ancient Greeks) there wouldn't be a place for such a character, he would fall out of the frame of reference. Arachne wins in the contest with Athena, and the latter leaves the 'battlefield' with her head low. Otus and Ethialtes are entertained by Zeus's wife... Naturally, this is inconceivable for a Greek myth. This implies the most important function of the Greek religion - the educational-ideological role it plays. Myths were meant to demonstrate in an instructive way: an argument with gods and their satraps on earth (kings, aristocracy) is useless, fatal for the wrangler, and the only result of it will be the flawless victory of a higher person in the hierarchy. Thus, through subordination to divine masters, people were put into the habit of subordinating to worldly masters.

But looking behind the cover of edification and preaching we will see the most important thing - what motivated Odysseus who was beating Thersites, Zeus who was tormenting Prometheus, Athena who forced Arachne to commit suicide. We will see fear. Fear of gods, seemingly powerful and invincible before a vast disempowered mass

of the mortals, in the midst of which, Bravehearts are born over and over again and openly challenge the 'eternal' order. And it becomes clear: the mythology only reflects the actual perpetual horror of the rulers in the face of the slightest possibility of a popular uprising.

Yet, however, the Greek people were being scared by the educational myths, they have inevitably made way to new Thersites and Prometheuses. And I want to believe that at some point they will overturn the Olympus.

October-November 2012

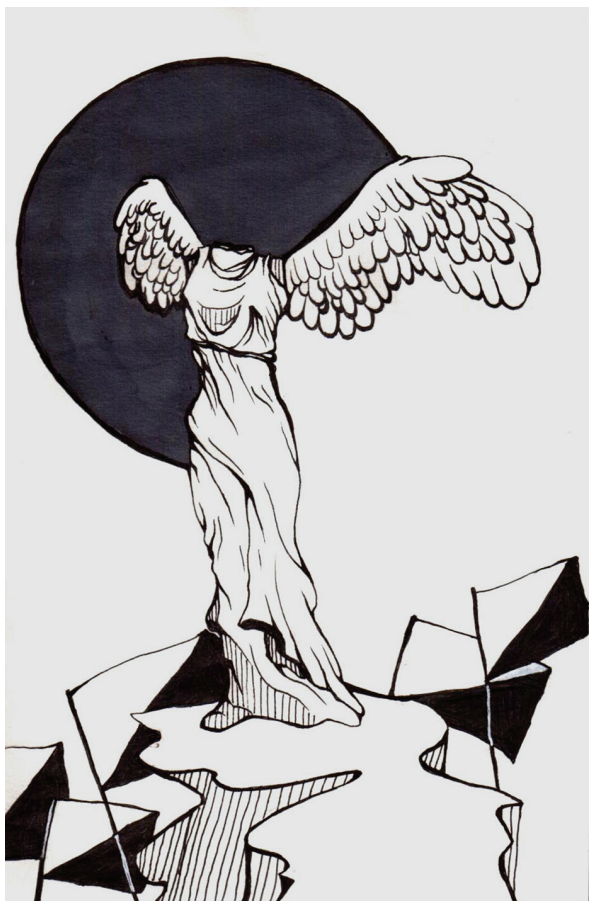
He who conceits himself the master of heaven,
Will be cast down to hell by his own children.
Poseidon and Zeus treated like this
Kronos who owned everything on earth.

With no fear before Athena stood
Arachne and called her out to a contest.
A yester gladiator fought consuls
A hundred years before the Crucifixion of Christ.

Not everyone dares to challenge the authority,
To loudly declare that the cold idol is dead,
And though he never saw equality in life,
To put an equals sign between the cloud-
assembler and a slave.

Though even now the hiss of lashes doesn't
cease,
The heroes of the past, you are not forgotten!
New Thersites proclaim on the Internet
And a new Prometheus pours petrol into
bottles...

March 2015



THE DIVINE RETRIBUTION

Summer 2013. It's hot. Gypsy and I decided to go for an everyday walk, to change the green concrete of the cell walls for the gray concrete of the exercise yard for a while. Our cell-mate K stays in the house.

It's an everyday, painfully familiar route. The door swings open - we go right. Down the stairs. A tired shepherd-dog, three screws. One staircase, another one, and we find ourselves in the yards. Seven exercise yards of Mogilev prison. The same cells, but no furniture and ceiling. Instead of the ceiling there are two layers of wire mesh. A cop named Yura brings us to the seventh and locks the door. Our authorised hour starts.

As usual, we are happy to see the sun. In an hour of our walk it will manage to go a whole metre down the wall. We speak about trifles, Gypsy tells his rural drug dealer's stories. Suddenly from the next yard we hear a loud rolling and genuine laughter:

'Buahaha! Ahahaha!'

And again.

Our first thought is that they brought for a walk some large cell and cellies are having fun there. But we listen in and understand that the

man is alone. Alone? Why would he laugh so loudly and naturally being by himself? Now we remember: they often bring for a walk Lyosha Guz at the same time as us.

Alexei Guz is a certain legend of Mogilev gaol. A former cadet of the Academy of Ministry of Interior, a professional sportsman. By hearsay, when he was transferred to the prison for the first time, he beat up the whole relief of local screws while being put in the cell. They never forgave him and abused him for a long time...

He got 25 years for kidnapping Zavadsky¹, complacency in the murder of an Azerbaijanian family of five people and many other things... He spent almost eleven years in solitary.

Is he really alone there in the yard? What is the reason of his rolling laughter? We continued listening in. Soon the laughter changed with singing:

Mist covers a sleeping city
Winds go through gateways and yards
But it's not our first time, it's our fate
To keep peace on these streets!

1 Dmitry Zavadsky was a Belarusian journalist who disappeared and was presumably murdered in 2000 for his political reports.

Yeah! Wish them good luck.
Yeah! It doesn't matter that it's a dirty pool.
Yeah! If tomorrow is better than yesterday,
'We'll make it', policemen will answer...²

No, it didn't feel like when school kids sing at music classes who just want to shout out the lyrics. The voice was hard, confident, the verses were sang expressively, with feeling, with some pathetic burst.

Gypsy and I exchanged glances and smiles. It was self-explanatory. In a few minutes, when 'We'll make it' was over, we heard:

A smile will make a dull day brighter,
A smile will make a rainbow appear in the sky...
Communicate your smile,
And it will come back to you more than once!³

...

He sang the whole thing. From the first to the last line. However many verses there were, it looked like he sang them all. Apparently, he had memorised it.

2 Lyrics of a popular Russian song 'We'll make it' from a TV series about cops.

3 A popular children song 'Smile' from a Soviet cartoon.

The sun went down the concrete texture by its regular metre. The time of the walk was over. The doors started clinging, Yura began to bring back home people from the first yards... Clapping of the doors, scuffle of feet. All possible sounds are explored long ago - soon it's going to be our turn, the doors are clapping closer and closer. We go out. Only one screw is bringing us back. That's good. I want to be certain that it was really Lyosha Guz in the next yard.

Walking along the door I open the peephole for a few seconds and see: right in the middle of the concrete 'walking room' stands a sturdy and tall bearded man throwing back his head and looking through the wire mesh at the sun. It's surprising, it's strictly prohibited to have a beard in prison.

I closed my eyes and thought: five people, twenty five year stretch, eleven years in solitary. There are no accidents, especially when it's about human life.

Now I see what it looks like - the Divine Retribution.

March 2016

A RIOT IN THE PRISON QUARANTINE

Any prison riot is almost always an uprising of doomed people. A priori the potency of rebels and punishers is not equal, the riot will be suppressed in any case: by de-seg, SHU, beating, driving up the numbers of new sentences or even by killing rebels. The question is only what damage a riot will cause to the existing system and therefore, will the probability of a new riot become a factor that will restrain the officers from the next offence against the prisoners' rights. That is the purpose of a prison riot. Therefore, every riot in prison is a premise and a guarantee that it will give slightly better living conditions to future generations of inmates. For a long time, there have been no real riots in Belarusian prisons. The times when cons could beat the administrative staff, break the fences and seize the barracks remained in the 90s. That is why nowadays, in the context of the general 'tranquility' in prisons and the obedience of the absolute majority of the cons, even a simple insubordination of more than a couple of people is considered to be a riot and an emergency.

* * *

I was brought to the correctional colony No. 15 on June 12, 2011. All newcomers are sent to quarantine for two-three weeks. It is a separate section, isolated from others, with a much stricter regime, without labour but with multiple everyday duties like cleaning floors, scrubbing sinks, sweeping the yard twice a day plus some other useless activities. The purpose of quarantine is to let a con understand 'where he got to', to single out those who plan to be involved in criminal gangs and be disobedient. It is done through making a prisoner break some informal taboos that are present in the criminal world and subject him to a formal cop discipline. For example, about 15-17 years ago the inner yard of a barrack was swept either by brats or by any type of degraded people. It was considered to be beneath 'muzhik' to do it, saying nothing of a 'blatnoy'. If you were offered a broom in the quarantine, you were expected to proudly refuse and go to the de-seg – and only after that, you would get to the normal housing unit. This taboo was slowly eradicated by the administration, year after year. And nowadays a yard is swept by 99% of cons or even more. If you don't sweep, you won't get to the housing unit right from the quarantine, you will get to a de-seg, SHU, and then to a prison, or 'spinning out' under article 411 (see 'The Open Letter').

In earlier years, only brats washed sinks (as everybody spits there!), now in almost all prisons it is done by 'muzhiks'. Though that job is still considered to be 'small-time'. In the process of dying out, these rules are going through some funny deformations. For example in the correctional colony No. 15, in the quarantine, all are going through scrubbing sinks but the one who has done it in the housing section automatically will be moved to the 'brats' caste. In compliance with the stricter regime in general, there are also stricter punishments for those who break the rules in the quarantine. Collective responsibility is widely used. For example, if a convict smoked in the toilet at night, then a quarantine keeper snitches on him to the cops. They come to the quarantine and organise 'examination of the outer appearance' of all the inhabitants (usually about 40-50 people). This lasts an hour or an hour and a half: they send everyone to the yard with their bags and all their stuff, they shakedown the bags, make people stand under the sun or squat with hands on the nape ('prisoner transport pose' as it is called by cops) and listen to a lecture on 'inadmissibility of routine violation' for half an hour.

The story that happened to me is directly connected with a know-how of No. 15: for a fault of one person, they sent the whole quarantine

section to the ground and made them march in circles – in unison. On my arrival to the pen, I decided from the very beginning that I wouldn't try to live like a 'blatnoy' or provoke the cops into reprisals. I would live peacefully according to the routine, mind my own business, read my books and do my things. In general, I wouldn't 'show off', just like I had been advised by old and experienced cons that I happened to meet during the eight months of my previous imprisonment. But when I found out about such brutal collective punishments (nothing like that is in the laws. To make prisoners march in circles is a mere taunt caused by overindulgence of power), I thought that it was better to attract attention to myself and be punished, then to do such humiliating things. By good fortune, I wasn't the only political prisoner in the quarantine. At that time there were two more people: Yauhen Vaskovich, sentenced to 7 years for arson of the KGB quarters in Bobruisk, and Yauhen Sakret, a prisoner of 'Ploschcha-2010', who got three years for striking a riot policeman's shield with a crowbar three times. Besides us in the quarantine, there were several no-drama guys that seemed not ready to put up with the outrage. Having talked with them several times and discussed what was going

on, we decided that refusal to march should be collective. Having got the support of two more guys, Roma and Yegor, and having done an awareness-raising campaign ('If they take us to the ground, no one marches!') among all who we knew in the quarantine, Yauhen and I started to wait and see when the cops would decide to use their tactics again so that we would have a chance to deliberately refuse and give an example to others. Yegor especially had a formal reason for refusal: he had no shoes (his shoe size was 47), he walked in slippers in the quarantine. We didn't have to wait long. Soon Yegor had a verbal confrontation with a quarantine orderly - a little nasty 'kozyol'.

Yegor promised him to stick a shiv in his side, of course, it was a blind threat, but it was enough and the orderly ran to the quarantine keeper Boroda to complain. Boroda was an exceptional jerkoff (even by the prison standards). He was in his 25th year and was yoked together with the cops by the multiple lives they ruined together. That is why seeing the threat to his ward he ran to the officers of the regime department without thinking twice. Two officers came: Rogovtsev (his nickname was Socket due to his funny upturned nose) and Moskalyov (Dog), who started to chase us out to the parade ground.

Taking the copy of Solzhenitsyn that I was reading at the time, I followed the others (there is no place to leave your things in the quarantine – during the day it is not permitted to enter the sleeping quarters where your drawer unit stands, so you have to carry all your stuff with you). It had been raining lightly since the morning. Having placed the cons in a row on the ground next to the quarantine, Dog started his ‘preventive talk’:

‘Look who you are following! They come – no motherland, no flag – and try to egg you on to something! And you are buying it!’

Those days in the quarantine there were several ‘maximum security prisoners’ from prison No. 4 – it seems that the regime officer was sure that the conflict with the ‘kozly’ was due to their influence.

‘Whoever is in conflict with the activists [*kozyols*] and break the rules, will go to de-seg right away! And no early parole for you in this case! Did you get it?!’

Yegor decided to contradict him while the rest of formation was meekly keeping silent. He said that the activists looked for trouble themselves, they cheeked and demanded to do stupid things. But Dog, being a real cop, wasn’t trying to figure out who was right and who was wrong, but just started to talk back to Yegor, strolling slowly along the formation. Vaskovich jumped in the skirmish:

‘You don’t have the right to say so! You degrade his human dignity!’

‘He has no dignity!’, Dog replied without any doubt.

‘He has dignity! Everyone has it!’

For sure, such a long hassle with the cons wasn’t in Dog’s cards and it was undermining his authority. Socket came on board:

‘Come on, all fall in fives!’, Rogovtsev started to place everyone at the edge of the ground. Absolutely untimely, the rain turned into a downpour. The smell of wet asphalt and the prospects of solitary confinement spread in the air. Yauhen, Roma and I exchanged glances. All of us fell in fives on the ground. I was in the second five. Yauhen and Yegor were in the first one. In a pretentious manner Dog and Socket strolled along the ‘box’ of the cons, anticipating how they would mock at and laugh their heads off watching the herd marching in circles.

‘And now we will march all the way to that line! And it should be in unison! Start with the left foot! A-a-a-a-nd ONE!’, Socket commanded.

Three people started to move along the ground trying to absurdly imitate the soldiers’ stride. Yegor and Yauhen remained standing. The cops, who were slightly puzzled by such an impudent disobedience didn’t know what to do and simply

called them away and ordered them to stand a little way off the formation. Meanwhile, it was the turn of the second five.

‘Left! A-a-a-nd ONE!’

I was intently observing my neighbours in the five. One just made a slight move to make a step when a scream came from the side of Yauhen:

‘Stand still!!!’

Right away they dragged him to the dungeon. None of our five except for one moved. I looked at Socket: there was bewilderment in his eyes. He probably thought that we hadn’t heard him. He repeated even louder:

‘A-a-a-nd, ONE!!!’

The five was at a standstill as before.

‘What the fuck are you thinking?? Disobedience?!’ Socket screamed losing his breath from anger and growing furious. Moskalyov came on board:

‘Everyone squat!!! Hands on the nape!!!’

The line didn’t budge.

‘Everyone fucking squat!!!’ Socket yelled repeating after Dog.

‘You squat’, I said loud and clear.

‘Who said it?’ Dog asked calmly.

‘I did’.

‘Come here’.

I approached him with a slight sense of anxiety. Moskalyov and a couple of other cops (there was already quite a crowd - emergency in the quarantine!) started to jump on me, to provoke and threaten me. I was expecting a blow, but it didn't come. I kept silent, giving no answer to them. Suddenly I heard the noise behind – Socket was walking next to the formation and with the yell 'SIT THE FUCK DOWN!!!' hitting the backs of those who were standing on the fringe, giving them headnuts. I turned away and continued listening to the bullying of the cops. Somehow unnoted, Yegor also managed to quarrel with the cops – and he was also dragged to the de-seg. They told me to go back. I turned around and saw that the whole quarantine was squatting already. Having thought that one's as good as none I sat down, too (later I put myself down on for it: I should have remained standing). The downpour didn't stop. For about the ten minutes, we were listening to the 'disciplinary' yelling of Socket and his threats to send us all to the de-seg. I was sitting covered by my copy of Solzhenitsyn. Socket couldn't walk past me without a comment:

'Is it 'The Gulag Archipelago'? Read, read it. It will come useful!'

'What a great title for Radio Freedom', I thought...

They ordered us to stand up.

‘So, anyone else wants to go to the de-seg?’ Socket continued his attack hinting at Yegor and Yauhen.

‘And if there will be even the slightest conflict with the activists all will be sent there, understood?! And now fall in. Quick march – to the quarantine. A-a-a-nd ONE!’

I was in the first five. It was about 20 meters from our line to the quarantine doors. My cards didn’t change: we had agreed with the guys, so I had to do what I had promised to. And that fact that they might lock us in the slammer was clear from the start. Four people in our line started to walk towards the quarantine, ridiculously trying to march in unison. I was the only one who remained standing. Moskalyov called me again. I got surrounded by the whole crowd of cops who started screaming at me interrupting each other:

‘So, you are trying to be strident, aren’t you?!’

‘All the strident ones are going directly to the maximum security, get it!’

‘What are you in for? Three-three-nine? You’re a dumb-ass?!’

‘You won’t get any reduction!’

‘Just write him up, let him stay in the de-seg for a while!’... and so on.

I wasn't listening to them so much – I got soaked already from the rain and was shaking because of the nerves and rage – line by line my neighbours in the quarantine were leaving to the barrack, stepping up. No one remained standing.

* * *

This story quickly spread throughout the whole pen, the local 'rebels' were happy for us: 'The quarantine had a riot!' The cons joked: when 'zero squad' (as they called us) carried food canisters along the central alley, they theatrically made room for us: 'Make space, the 'blatnoys' are coming!' Vaskovich and Yegor got their time in the de-seg, were released and properly met by us. Pretty soon Yegor was taken to the pretrial custody because of some newly discovered evidence. I still wonder why I wasn't sent to the dungeon back then. However, some outcomes were there: first I was called to the office of Slesarev, the head of the operative department (later he became the deputy governor). He threatened me with maximum security prison, article 411 and use of physical force in case of further disobedience (ironically, in the next 4,5 years of imprisonment I came through all of the mentioned by him). Besides, I was put on some sort of preventive control – for the next couple

of weeks every evening we had screws dropping by to 'check Dziadok': to see that he didn't run away, didn't cause any mayhem. After everything that happened people were smoking in the toilets many times, quarreling with 'kozly' and violating the regime. Some were sent to the de-seg for it, some were put on unscheduled duty. A couple of times the whole quarantine was even taken to the ground with all the belongings. But that was the last time they tried to make us march.

April 2017

MOWGLI

He was brought to our house, 152, in the evening. He was a bare-boned, smutty creature of about sixteen years old with a fearful glance - just like a baited animal. In the first few minutes we couldn't get any sense out of him. Who is he? Which house is he from? He only shook his head, and sullenly blinked in confusion. Eventually we took him to the table, gave him some tea and finally got something out of him. Meet Sasha K., twenty-one years old, from Cherven¹. He was staying in a house with cons who were under high security, but they made him ask the screws to be transferred to another cell. It was only later that we figured out why.

He had been convicted of possessing a stolen backpack with a camera. I jokingly called him Mowgli, because he looked like someone who had just come out of the forest, plus he had a dark complexion. The nickname caught on quickly.

A few days passed. In a consolidated effort the house dressed Mowgli, cut his hair and made him have a wash. He started to look more human. He didn't have anything on him, not even a razor,

1 A provincial town in Belarus.

but we provided him with everything that he needed. Sasha didn't receive parcels or letters, but he ate and smoked with us since we lived communally.

As time went on he began to grow bolder, and as he saw that we were people and not beasts, he started to put his worst foot forward. He would butt in on people's conversations and talk nonsense. He would comment when it was not welcome, or come to the feeder and talk to the cops - which he doesn't know how to do at all - and he'd snap at fair criticism. After a few such episodes the main method of communicating with him became screaming. Mowgli was screamed at from dusk till dawn, since there wasn't an hour when he wasn't doing something wrong. Sasha didn't care a bit.

I was interested in him, and I felt he was a rare individual. Of course, on the outside I didn't have a chance to communicate with such people, but here I could to my heart's content. I was probably the only one in the house who never shouted at him - well, almost never - and spoke to him as an equal, though it wasn't always easy.

Soon, many interesting details about Mowgli's background revealed themselves. His father was in Glubokoye colony No. 13, and had been for a long time. Where his mother was, was

not clear, and Mowgli used to live with an aunt who apparently wasn't very fond of him. The guy had been growing up on his own; at least I didn't see any signs of a meaningful upbringing. Sasha had spent almost his whole life on the street; drinking, sniffing glue and stealing. He had finished studying at a technical school but could hardly write, and it was an overwhelming task for him to read more than a few lines. In my estimation, his development was equal to that of an eleven or twelve year old child. Sometimes I looked at Mowgli and thought: 'So much for the 21st century in the centre of Europe'. Under the nose of the highly regarded social, welfare and educational institutions, a shut-in grew up who can't read at twenty-one - and the only thing they could think to do with him was to put him in prison. Now it's almost inevitable that he will drink, steal and sit in jail for his whole life, and nobody cares. Nobody, apart from a local police department which has a higher crime rate because of him.

But if the state didn't care for Mowgli, NGO's did. As a child, he went to Italy on a Chernobyl rehabilitation project. I don't remember the details, the only thing that comes to mind is how he told us about his call to the Italians from Belarus:

‘I’m calling, she picks up the phone... And I’m like: “Hello!” She’s like: “Pronto! Pronto!” And I’m like: “Khuyonto!”² and I hang up!’ At this point Mowgli burst into laughter, apparently satisfied with his subtle humour.

Mowgli also had asthma. Sometimes he would burst into a heavy cough and then ask the screw for an inhaler. He couldn’t take it into the cell because it was metal, so they left it in the locker in the hall. The inhaler was actually ‘from the Italians’. However, despite the horrible seizures he suffered, Sasha wouldn’t even consider quitting smoking.

Days passed, and Mowgli was clearly turning into a pariah in the house. Apart from not being able to behave himself, Sasha constantly screwed up; he would spoil a communal object, or drink a lot of diesel³ late at night and then vomit the whole night, preventing everyone from sleeping. He always had to be forced to wash his clothes and do his part in the cleaning of the house. At first, I defended him as he was constantly yelled at. It was a pity to watch him shrink at the dreadful roar and popping eyes of our cellmates.

2 A rhyme word for ‘Pronto’ made of the root ‘Khuy’ (‘dick’ in Russian).

3 Very strong tea that prisoners usually drink to get high

A lot of times I tried to explain to him in a friendly way the rules of life in the house. These 'edifying' conversations helped for half a day at best, so after a few attempts I dropped the ball. Like I said before, iron-fist methods also didn't help him with his education. We soon became aware of an interesting psychological tendency; it was vital to Mowgli to be the centre of attention, even if this attention manifested itself solely in abuse and shouting. In order to be 'the star of the house' and be able to listen to everyone discussing him, he was ready to endure insults, attacks and threats.

In the following years I saw that it took a special kind of person to create this dynamic in the cell system. I often witnessed people who would deliberately annoy everyone around them to focus all attention on themselves, by any means possible.

Soon we ran out of ways to try and get through to him, apart from physical ways. He was asked, shouted at, threatened with many things, intimidated, deprived of cigarettes and ignored - but all this attention excited our Mowgli even more.

He started complaining that we treated him badly. He warned the screw of his intention to harm himself, and declared a hunger strike that lasted for just 15 minutes before he received his

first portion of soup from the chow server. Once he even wrote an application to be transferred again. On a sheet of paper from a notebook, in wiggly lines, hardly legible and in unbelievably curved letters he wrote something like:

aplication

Pleas can u bring me to anotha hous becus Ive done a thousand screwups, Im in everybodys way they always shout at me

To be fair, he never filed this application. At the same time, the process of drawing it up and the discussion of this act of Mowgli's took half a day, and he couldn't wish for more.

After the New Year in 2011, I was sent to the hospital in Zhodino prison (where I stayed at the pretrial facility during the investigation) to be treated for an ingrowing toenail. When I returned two weeks later, Mowgli was not in the house anymore. My cellies informed me that just after my departure, Sasha went rogue – he either experienced some mental issue, or successfully imitated it. In particular, he would bang on the walls for no reason, talk nonsense more than ever, hide behind the toilet door, steal things from the collective pot, and he even

stole and hid someone else's letter. Eventually they could bear it no longer, and started kicking him heartily. As a result, the cops realised that something was wrong with Sasha and took him to the infirmary.

* * *

It's been almost three years. I'm in Zhodino prison again, but not as a defendant anymore. They brought me here from Mogilev prison to treat my stomach, since Zhodino has a wing of the Republican infirmary. When I got here I was called in to see the Operative, probably to suss me out. On the wall of the Operative's office there are photos of convicts who are on the preventive registry. While scanning the line 'Inclined to commit suicide or self-harm', I met Mowgli's eyes. Holy crap! It's him, indeed. The surname corresponds. He probably went down for a second or even third time after the end of his term.

I returned to my house and started recalling everything I'm telling you now. I remembered the asthma inhaler, the wolf-ling's gaze, totally rotten teeth at twenty-one, locks of hair falling to a basin with soapy water when we were shaving his head... And a question came to my mind: what would happen with Sasha when he dies? Unfortunately, I'm pretty sure he will not last

long, unless he gets a long term sentence and the prison 'preserves' him.

Who would weep for him? Will there be anyone to carry his coffin?

Will he repeat the fate of Balzac's Father Goriot, who was dying almost totally alone, and it was strangers who took care of his final journey?

Mowgli doesn't have relatives, hardly any friends, and if he has any they are obviously not the best representatives of the human race. It occurred to me that it must be very boring and bleak not only to live like that, but to die as well, when you are all alone. It also occurred to me that the one who threw me in jail for a political crime, and the one who made a thief and an outcast in the margins of life out of Mowgli, is the same leviathan.

March 2015



THE SPACED-OUT

It is summer of 2012. Shklov correctional colony No. 17. In a solitary cell days alternate each other - I make up their contents by myself, so that I don't get bored. Lunch has just finished, the chow server took away the bowls. There is nothing to do, no mood for reading or learning, the heat of the afternoon sun makes me sleepy. I spread my jacket under the small table (so the light of the lamp isn't in my eyes), put an Arabic textbook under my head and prepared to pass through another hour of another day in my sleep.

Having snuggled comfortably I began to fall asleep, when suddenly I heard the buzz of the electronic lock and a clang of metal bars at the end of the corridor. 'Someone else has been brought', I thought. Every day at about 3 p.m. there was a 'baptism' (disciplinary commission) happening in the colony - an event where the governor distributes days you have to stay in the de-seg or SHU (although this is in months), and where any deprivations of visits and care packages as punishment are announced.

...I hear the sound of stomping boots of at least two people. Yeah, an officer brought a prisoner. I'm wondering where they are going: to the de-

seg or the SHU cell? Suddenly, the corridor fills with a hoarse, three-pack-a-day voice screaming at the top of his lungs:

Apple trees and pear trees went into blooming!

River mists began a floating flow!

She came out and went ashore, Katyusha...

Now it's clear. This is Kolya.

Kolya is a prisoner who's gone nuts, I think he is in his fifties, or maybe younger – he looks too unhealthy. People like him were called 'spaced-out' by the convicts. Kolya and other 'spaced-outs' were subjects of local legends: they were said to walk around the prison without a name badge, to not shave, to sauce cops off, and to be free to yell everything they wanted whenever they wanted. During moments of special aggravations he is locked in a punishment cell - so he doesn't go completely raving mad.

Kolya got ten nights. Of course, this time was fun for him, but obviously not for the other prisoners and cops. Kolya used to amuse himself by not giving back a bowl to the chow server after taking meals. One wasn't allowed to keep them in the de-seg or the SHU, so they were taken back after each meal. But not from Kolya. Often after lunch, breakfast or dinner I would hear a dialogue like this in the corridor:

Supervisor: Have you eaten?

Kolya: I have.

Supervisor: Give me the bowl.

Kolya: F*ck you!

Supervisor: Give me the bowl, f*cking cocksucker!

Kolya: F*ck you!!!

... This was followed by approximately 15 minutes of wrangles, after which furious supervisor would open the cell, take the bowl himself and concurrently hit Kolya in his liver.

Prisoners didn't like Kolya because of his night freak sessions. At daytime, he used to doze off, and at night he took the chain used to fasten to his bunk bed to the wall and hit it against his bed. Hellish noise filled the whole barrack and let neither prisoners nor supervisors sleep.

Having spent those 10 nights (not for the first time) Kolya disappeared. Rumour has it, he was taken to the psyche ward at the 3rd correctional colony in Vitebsk.

* * *

Human dementation in prison is a rather frequent phenomenon. Not only because people with 'limited sanity' or intellectually challenged people often get here, but the prison

itself contributes to the development of various kinds of mental disorders. Here is what Peter Kropotkin wrote about this in his 'Memoirs of a Revolutionist':

'Underneath me was lodged a peasant, whom Serdukóff knew. He talked to him by means of knocks; and even against my will, often unconsciously during my work, I followed their conversations. I also spoke to him. Now, if solitary confinement without any sort of work is hard for educated men, it is infinitely harder for a peasant who is accustomed to physical work, and not at all wont to spend years in reading. Our peasant friend felt quite miserable, and having been kept for nearly two years in another prison before he was brought to the fortress, he was already broken down. His crime was that he had listened to socialists. Soon I began to notice, to my terror, that from time to time his mind wandered. Gradually his thoughts grew more and more confused, and we two perceived, step by step, day by day, evidences that his reason was failing, until his talk became at last that of a lunatic. Frightful noises and wild cries came next from the lower story; our neighbor was mad, but was still kept for several months in the casemate before he was removed to an asylum, from which he never emerged. To witness the destruction of a man's mind, under such conditions, was terrible.'

To witness the consequence of that destruction myself, was no less terrible.

When I was in the 17th correctional colony, Kuzya – a ‘brat’, was held in one of the de-seg cells. He was locked there not for disciplinary reasons, but for protection from other prisoners. Kuzya’s problem was that he acted weird; particularly, he soiled himself, and anywhere at all. According to prisoners’ stories, he became like this as a result of regular beatings in the section. Kuzya had been beaten for being a ‘brat’ and, most likely, for being ‘abnormal’ before he began to ‘shit’. And after that they continued to beat him, but already for the fact that he ‘shitted’, and it was unbearable to live with him in a barrack. Apart from the beatings there were also admonitions, and many times he had been given clean clothes and bed linen, but everything was in vain. In order to get rid of him, the administration found a ‘wonderful’ way out: they put Kuzya to protective custody, which differed from the conditions of a punishment cell only by the presence of a mattress on the floor. Every few days I heard the swearing of the orderly who cursed Kuzya as the mattress was regularly spoiled. They say, when Kuzya’s mother visited him in prison, she demanded the administration to explain what they had done to her son...

There was another character in Shklov colony No. 17 (I forgot his name). He was put in solitary for stealing from other barrack residents. Cons had beaten him a few times until he asked to be hidden. Almost every day he flew into rage: he began to shout some inarticulate sounds out of the cell and loudly swear at no one and for nothing. This lasted for hours. But one day he even began to batter the unsophisticated 'furniture' in his cell, and only then cops reacted – right, he could spoil the state-owned property! - and called for a doctor. The guards tied up the poor fellow, and the doctor gave him some injection. Then the sounds gradually waned, and after half an hour he went completely silent.

Once in a while the punishment section housed several mentally unstable inmates at once, and then real fun began. Just imagine: a corridor with 24 cells, wooden doors that let you hear everything that is happening inside, and concrete walls creating excellent acoustics. You sit alone in your cell and hear voices coming from several sides at the same time:

'Uuugh... uuuugh... aaaarh... aaaarh...'

'F*ck! Go f*ck yourselves, fags! F*cking faggots!!!'

'A-a-a-a-a-a!!! A-a-a-a-a-a!!! A-a-a-a-a-a!!!'

... and this lasts for several hours – until crazy comrades exhaust their energy. Such moments make you doubt whether you are still in prison or in a mental asylum. It starts to feel like you gradually go nuts too.

As I have already written, many ‘spaced-outs’ become real celebrities: problematic cons are moved from colony to colony and their reputation precedes them. Hockey is one of them – a convict from Mogilev colony No. 15. He is a stooped man, of about 40 years old and constantly wearing stubble on his face. He’s got a 25-year sentence for murder of a KGB agent, as other cons say. He spent his first 5 years in Grodno prison convicted for ‘extremely serious crime’, and this is where he apparently went nuts, or KGB agents beat his head off. No one knows the details because it is impossible to communicate with Hockey closely.

One of the most popular gags about Hockey is about a radio transmitter in his cap. He is sure that cops have installed a mike in there, that’s why he often could be found walking around and muttering swears to his cap addressing them to the police, the government and Lukashenko. Hockey liked to abuse Belarusians as well (for electing Lukashenko), especially while watching TV. Although Lukashenko supporters can hardly

be found among the convicts, Hockey was regularly beaten for abusing Belarusians. By the way, he was a Russian himself.

He liked to invent sophisticated curses and write them down in a notebook. Hockey had many writing books all full of notes in microscopic writing. Those who had a chance to look at them say that these notes are just an incoherent incomprehensible word salad full of swears.

However, the most inexhaustible source of fun for the cons was Hockey's demeanor with the cops. One day he brought some porridge from the canteen and put it on a newspaper with a sign: 'For Mahoney' (Mahoney is a nickname of an ex-warden of the correctional colony No. 15, whose last name was Makhankov). Once, Hockey walked around shouting swears out loud to 'Makhanya and Tolkachikha'. He was called in by the administration: the warden Makhankov and his deputy Tolkachev. They asked him a question:

'Who are Makhanya and Tolkachikha?'

'They are my whores from Moscow!'

With an honest look, Hockey departed to the de-seg.

One day some cadets visited the correctional colony in Mogilev. Having walked through the 'central avenue' they headed further in order to look around the rest of the prison. One of

the cadets came off and started looking at the surrounding sections separated with metal bars. To his misfortune, Hockey was standing in one of the sections. Clutching hold of the bars he stared at the cadet with his crazy eyes and shouted some unthinkable curses in his direction:

‘Who the fuck are you looking at?.. Why come here, faggots?.. Fucking scum pig...!’

The cadet considered it would be better to catch up with the rest...

I don’t know whether he was beaten by the cops at the 15th pen, but he was regularly put into the de-seg. Anyhow, it did not affect his behavior in any way.

The most active hotbed of insanity among the convicts is undoubtedly the prison. The risk group consists of those sentenced to long-term confinement, both those who are in solitary and in common cells. Constrained space, constant conflicts, swearing, heated atmosphere, fear, inability to change the situation, provocations and bullying by cops, many years of imprisonment ahead and, as a result, despair – all these factors contribute greatly to insanity.

There are not enough solitary cells for everyone so the administration usually sends ‘spaced-outs’ to the de-seg. Once, when I was sitting in one of those cells late at night (by the way, they were

situated in the basement), I suddenly heard loud rhythmic strokes and a wild cry in one of the neighboring cells:

‘Peeoople!!! Peeoople!!!’

The strokes did not stop for an hour and were alternated with shouts: ‘Let me out of here!!!’ - until a block warden came and gave a couple of punches to the brawler. That day he calmed down, but on the following day everything started anew... I asked the guys from the neighboring cells about what had been going on there, but learned nothing apart from ‘one of the scums had gone nuts’. To say that I felt strong compassion for this man would be hypocritical. But trying to imagine the level of fear and despair that made him, sitting in the basement of prison, hammer at the door and call ‘people’, I was really horrified. Monotony, hopelessness, oppressive punishment chambers, mental illness and, perhaps, a long term ahead – this is a real abyss.

It is worth saying that the insanity of most ‘spaced-outs’ manifests itself only from time to time. There are also moments of serenity. This was the case for Sanya - named Shrek - another inhabitant of the prison in Mogilev. This guy was not even 30 years old. As a child, he studied at school for mentally challenged children. Even if he had parents, in prison they did not help him in any

way. Doing his time for murder, Shrek had not ever received any support from the outside. As a rule, Shrek was kept in solitary, because he did not get along with anyone. Usually his cell was quiet, but from time to time one could hear swears addressed to the cops on the most trivial pretext. Usually he displaced his anger onto supervisors who looked in the feeder during the mealtime. But the worst times started when Shrek ran out of cigarettes. Since he had no money to buy something in a shop, he was engaged in begging cops for cigarettes. He used to be given 5 cigarettes of the worst brand a day. If he didn't get them, he began to yell and hit at the door, break furniture in a cell, smash the washbasin, break the glass in the window frame. As a demonstration of a 'protest' against the greed of the cops, he refused to go for a walk, cursing them generously.

Cops used to beat Shrek often. Sometimes they did it right in the cell, sometimes while calling him to the 'assembly', but always without much effect. In moments of particular outrage, when the noise from his cell completely pissed off the orderlies, they simply called the doctor who gave him a shot (as the convicts said - Thorazine), and Shrek calmed down for a day or so.

In the same way as Hockey was a celebrity at the 15th correctional colony, Ira was in the

Mogilev gaol. She was one of the few women I met in prison, and she was staying in the next cell to me: I was in the 18th, she was in the 19th. The level of insanity she demonstrated was simply horrifying. For 5-6 hours every day - regardless of the time of day, it could be early morning or late night - a continuous incoherent text came out of her cell, which was a stream of sick consciousness. I can't recapitulate even a small part of it: memory refused to record it. Let's just say she started talking about something, for example, airplanes, or something she saw on TV, or about planets and galaxies, she uttered several sentences about it, then starting from the last words of the sentence she raised a new topic - and this was never-ending. What was most striking to me - she did not just talk, she screamed, shouted so loudly that the whole floor could hear her and all other floors could, too, when she approached the window. She invariably interjected her speech with threats and foul language addressing it to cops. Exquisite and pretentious swears poured on the administration when she was taken out for a walk. Those cops who were smarter just kept silent, the more flawed ones began to abuse her in response.

Ira actively communicated with the neighboring cells through the grilled window begging for cigarettes. And it was a disaster if

some rudeness or disrespect was shown to her from some cell: she climbed onto the windowsill and vilified the inhabitants of this cell for hours – and the whole prison heard it.

In retaliation to cops for not giving her cigarettes or just for fun she could stand naked on a daily head count. Or she could start drumming on radiators in the dead of night essentially depriving the entire floor of sleep. In that case the doctor would come and inject her Thorazine.

But those prisoners who had contacted her through mail said that, judging by quite meaningful and even literary letters, 39-year-old Ira was quite a decent woman with a higher education, who had a daughter. As they say, it was in an effort to provide for her daughter that Ira had engaged into drug trafficking from Russia, for which she got 12 years of a strict-regime confinement...

The administration considers the demented people as an unfortunate misunderstanding. If they are 'quiet', that is their insanity does not violate the regime (there are loads of such people), then no one will pay attention to them at all. Well, a man has gone out of his mind – so what? It saves me an effort of talking about any treatment: there is only Valeria (to treat all nervous disorders) and Thorazine in

the prison medical pack for calming down the ungovernable. It's ridiculous to talk about the prevention of mental disorders in prison. Each correctional facility has only one psychologist (by the way, it's a cop in uniform, which clearly does not contribute to building a trustful relationship between them and the prisoners). In correctional colonies where they pay at least some attention to the work with inmates, even if it is just for show, a psychologist meets those who just arrived and talks to them. Sometimes they can organize a visit to the prayer room or a church. That's all. According to the regime, a psychologist is obliged to conduct regular conversations with every convicted person. But is this really possible if, for example, there are 1,500 people in the colony? In some penitentiaries I did not see a single psychologist for the entire time I was there. That is, a person is listed in the staff, fills in some papers, simulates working, gets paid for it, but does not really do anything at all. And then the Department of Corrections reports to the Ministry of Internal Affairs about the 'psychological work' and 'individual approach' to convicts. The Ministry, in its turn, tells tall tales to international organizations – how qualitatively and humanely the correctional colony system works in Belarus –

and everyone is happy. But prisons and colonies continue to grind someone's brains, producing morally disabled people by the time of release. The punitive system is built in such a way as to work with the consequences, not the causes. Did someone hang himself in the cell? Why find out what led to this, it is better to take away all the laces, belts and threads from prisoners, so that nobody could hang themselves even if they really want to. Someone went totally nuts and they began thrashing the door accompanying it with wild cries? Injection of Thorazine – let another shift listen to these cries as long as they can! And nobody cares what the reason was: if the regime officials sent back the parcel from relatives, a mother died or simply desperation led them to inadequacy.

Nobody heals the mentally ill in prison. Psych ward at notorious Vitebsk correctional colony No. 3 accepts only those who have completely lost active capacity: either they cannot work or keeping them in a punishment cell has already become harmful. As in any institution of the System people are only concerned with your functionality: do what you are demanded and do not stand out, no matter whether you are a hundred times paranoid, schizophrenic or just a fool. I find it difficult to judge the quality of

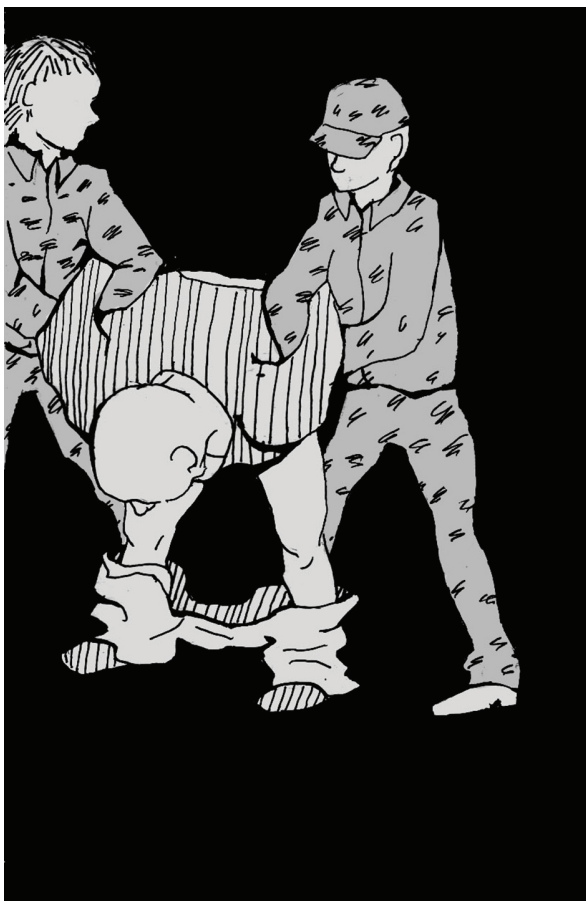
treatment in the psych ward at 3rd correctional colony, but I have not seen a single person who would voluntarily get back there...

* * *

Autumn 2012. The Shklov correctional colony No. 17. I was doing my last months in the SHU – ahead is a court hearing and transfer to the prison in Mogilev. Lunch is over: today it was noodles boiled to the state of homogeneous mass. Well, it's time to sleep. I prepared my usual 'couch', closed my eyes and almost zonked out, when I heard the familiar sounds - a buzz of the electronic lock and a clang of metal bars at the end of the corridor. Who is there this time? I almost fell asleep while they were bringing the prisoner to the guard – and suddenly I was thrown out of my dreams by a piercing voice, like a raven's croaking:

Apple trees and pear trees went into blooming!

July 2016



THE WIZARD

Introduction Prison

Names of some characters were changed.

An enclosed space with specific ethical norms, with perverted moral principles, where a human being has only one goal - to survive, gives birth to weird cause-effect relations.

You can believe or not in destiny, in the possibility of the Universe to materialize your thoughts and wishes, in karma, in boomerang rule, in Biblical 'you reap as you sow', you can consider all of the above a manifestation of Supreme forces or a logical consequence of our own actions, but in certain points of the Earth these rules manifest themselves as an invariable and ultimatum-like fact.

One of these points is located on the territory of Belarus: it is a facility called Prison No. 4, better known among convicts as Mogilev gaol.

Prison is one of the utmost and cruelest disciplinary sanctions specified by the Correctional Code for 'worst offenders of established procedure of conviction'. The worse one is probably Article

411 of the Criminal Code of Belarus (see *'An Open Letter'*). A prisoner can get to the gaol from a correctional colony by court order for up to three years. In prison the sentence is served in cell confinement: 3 to 12 people stay in a cell together 24/7 for years; they have an hour of walk per day, strict restrictions on the amount of personal belongings, one care package per year and quite often not everyone is subject to it (taking into account the amount of food available, it means that a prisoner is almost all the time hungry), and one visit per year - 2 hours of talking through the glass that often can be denied by the decision of the prison governor.

But the main point of Mogilev gaol is not in its 'hunger regime' but in who is in charge there and who sets up the rules.

Originally prison was created by correctional system for suppression of uprisings in colonies and isolation of those who could start one: crime lords, code-bound thieves, principled and charismatic political prisoners.

From the beginning of the so-called 'criminal revolution' in USSR republics in the infamous 90s the gaols became the center of those 'negators' – crime lords living by the thieves' rules that were pain in the ass for the prison administration; criminals that were not accepted neither by

prison's de-seg or the SHU. Their unity, dedication to the 'code' and readiness to use violence for enforcing them for sure led to their isolation in the cell system.

But times have changed. Organised crime in Belarus was all strangled (of course, apart from the Family that is control). Partially they were liquidated by death squads, partially the code-bound thieves got smaller in numbers and quarreled over with each other, the prisons were put under the control of the administration, so if we speak about it in cops' terms, a 'stable operational mode' was established there. In theory, gaols were to disappear or at least their number was to go down¹. However, the bureaucratic Soviet and of course Lukashenko's logic was not like that. Every gaol means not less than a hundred of employees of punishment execution department of MIA, consistent budget financing that was consistently siphoned off by the administration, and for sure wide corruptive opportunities for warders and regime officers. To close it all at once just because in Belarus there were no criminal leaders anymore? No way! If

1 At the moment there are three gaols in Belarus: in Mogilev (prison No. 4), in Zhodino (prison No. 8), in Grodno (prison No. 1). All three facilities have also pretrial detention facilities.

there is a prison – somebody should be put into it! The system chose another way: if a common convict got more obedient, we would lower the criteria for sending someone there – and the gaols would be filled with people again! And so already from the middle of 2000s the number of crime lords and ‘enforcers’ in Mogilev, Zhodino and Grodno’s gaols decreased and there were more common convicts (muzhiks). Now you can get to a gaol if you managed to get a cellphone to the prison, prepared home brew, got into a quarrel with the unit supervisor, wrote a complaint on the administration, refused to sweep common spaces, simply had a fight with another convict. When I was in, a guy got into Mogilev gaol for pouring water over a supply manager and told him it was pee. Colony administrations started to actively use gaols as a dumpsite for all who may cause any problem. Somebody lost a big sum of money in a game? Let’s put him into the gaol so no one would smash his head in the prison. Someone stole something from other prisoners? Everyone would start to kick him around and he could commit suicide... Let’s put him into the gaol, to be on a safe side! They even started to send common brats there on some unknown principle.

So, at the time of my arrival there (December 7, 2012) Mogilev gaol represented a prison block

with about 220 residents, among them only about 20 were crime lords and professional criminals. The rest, with few exceptions, were like those mentioned above. The criminals shared the power in prison with the administration, and in such a split-up of a pie everyone had their own benefits: the administration got control and absence of incidents, the criminals got the right to collect their 'common fund', superiority feeling over the gray mass of 'commoners' and numerous privileges from the cops.

Part 1. **Mirror Magician**

I spotted him already at the 'assembly' when our pack of newcomers to the gaol was frisked and divided among the cells.

His mouth was running like a garbage truck. A ringing voice. He had a Greek name (a rare thing for our part of the world) Kostas and an Armenian last name – Sarkisyan. His personal records were super thick, even thicker than mine (and it was quite a rare case, too).

'I am a complainer', Kostas gladly explained to all who were interested. 'I've filed (he told some lofty number)... complaints on the cops!' You could hear genuine pride in his voice.

We were facing the wall, our hands behind the backs, waiting for the search. Meanwhile, Kostas was already talking with the guards:

‘Look what I’ve got!’

He took a plain school copybook out of the bag and started to flip pages. All pages were in the reddish spots and odd scribbles that resembled signatures. ‘These are souls’, Sarkisyan explained. ‘I have bought them in the prison for a pack of cigarettes’.

Having looked closely I saw that the souls he bought were spots of blood of their owners with their signatures next to them.

‘They read a spell and declare that they give their souls to me – Kostas Sarkisyan!’, he was explaining gladly, with his coal black eyes shining. ‘And I give them a pack of “Fest” or “Korona”². And everybody is happy!’

Kostas was flipping page after page with the reddish spots, implying that there were plenty of people in the pen eager to agree on that bargain.

‘What the f*ck do you do it for?’ The guard was puzzled.

‘They charge me, like batteries’.

2 Cheap cigarettes brands.

‘F*ck, that is some sketchy shit’, the cop noted with a tint of fear. ‘Aren’t you scared of messing up with it?’

‘Huh! My grandma is the strongest witch of Armenia! She was. I myself am a Master of Mirror Magic. By the way, Kostas turned to another guard, ‘why did you have a row with the red-haired?’

The baffled cop exchanged looks with the colleague. Kostas continued taking by the beard:

‘You have a girlfriend, right?’

‘What if I do?’

‘She has red hair, I can see that’, the Wizard narrowed his eyelids looking at the guard point blank. ‘So why did you have a row?’

Looking how the Master of Mirror Magic played with the guards made me wonder if magic made easier his prison life in such a complex and dark place like a gaol. Or would it perplex it instead?

‘There are witchers, there are sorcerers. But I am a wizard. Those are totally different things!’ Kostas was educating not only cops, but everyone around who was attracted by such an unusual talk. At the time none of us knew that Mogilev gaol could do magic even better than Sarkisyan and that for the next 2.5 years it prepared tons of cruel adventures for him.

After the search the cops took us to 'triples'. It is a so to say prison quarantine. Eight cells, three people in each, with a higher security and located slightly at the side – in the side hall far from the main prison corridors. There newcomers stayed for 2-3 weeks, steeling themselves for the life in the cell system and going through all possible prison registrations with doctors, psychologists, officers, etc.

Wizard (that was how the crime lords named him) and I ended up in the adjacent houses. I was in No. 150, he got into No. 151. The constructional peculiarity of the triples was the following: thin walls and toilets next to each other through the wall. It meant that by opening the flush tank of the toilet you could talk, and by stretching your hand you could easily pass a thin parcel: a neighbor would take it with his hand, and you just pass it to him.

Not finding common grounds with the cell mates, I started to communicate extensively with Wizard.

He was 30 years old, from Gomel. His sentence was a standard eight years under article 328.3 (drug trafficking). Wizard was transferred from Correctional colony No. 3, Vitba). There he was screwing cops brains and tirelessly writing complaints to all possible authorities starting

from the Department of Corrections to KGB. But that was not the reason he got famous there, he got renowned due to his magic activity, of course. Not only had he bought souls of the inmates but also 'cured' the sick, made magical charms, spelled, got charged from the trees growing in the yard and one time he even started to put a spell on deputy governor in political field. In front of everyone he started to nail wax nails into his footprints reciting spells. According to the rumors and evidences of other prisoners from No. 3, the latter became the real reason for his transfer to the gaol.

Wizards managed to pull through a whole bunch of esoteric literature to the triples: Orlov's 'Temptation of the Evil', Papus's 'Traité méthodique de Science Occulte', a collection of Castaneda's books, printed copies of all sorts of mantras and chakras... He shared all these with me, he saw in me a person who was at least a little bit familiar with the sphere of his interests (I had been practicing yoga for a year by then and had read almost all Castaneda books even before that), so he started to initiate me not only in the details of his magical profession, but his business plans. They included organization of a sect after his release, he would be declared a prophet, of course, or the enlightened or something of that kind, and would start to train his adepts in 'battle magic'. Of

course, for huge amounts of money. Right upfront he offered me a partnership promising fabulous profits with minimal expenses. I delicately refused.

After getting settled in his small company Wizard started his magical experiments. In cell 151 spiritual sessions started. On a piece of paper Kostas drew a magical circle with the letters of alphabet, blotted it with his blood and reciting a spell hold a needle above the center of the circle. The needle pointed to the letters, in such a way a spirit from the portal opened by Kostas talked to him by answering his questions. By the requests of his cell mates Wizard gladly called the souls of their deceased relatives and for assistance he called all possible archangels for himself. When people from the neighboring cell started to complain on the vent panes that would open by themselves and on cruel nightmares, Wizard promised 'to close the portal'.

Pretty soon our time in the quarantine ended. First I and then Kostas were transferred to the main block. There Wizard had a vast field for his activities.

Part 2. **Fishing**

Fishing is a communication means of prisoners, 'inter-cell contacts' in the parlance of cops.

There were three types of fishing in prison: air fishing, wet one and *kabura*. The first two worked like that: a rope ('a horse') was stretched between cells by simple engineer devices, by means of which prisoners would pull carefully wrapped parcels or kites³ through the windows (air way) or through the draining of the sewer system (wet fishing). But in Mogilev gaol the main means of communication were *kaburas* – holes in the walls, ceiling or floor that allowed for connecting (working) with neighboring cells directly. Breaking a hole in cement wall without any more or less suitable metal tool took unbelievable amount of time and efforts. That's why the clever prisoners were carefully hiding their *kaburas* and were doing everything they could not to let cops find them.

The role of roads and inter-cell communication in the prisoner's life of Mogilev gaol is hard to overestimate. Every day at strictly appointed time four actuations happened in the prison. Every prisoner could write to anyone: to find a fellow-countrymen, to get the news from another pen, to ask about common friends and so on. 'Commoners' could write to *blatnoys* for a favor to get the 'necessities', to clarify some points of the code or to ask them to drop by and help with a conflict in

3 A secret message in prison.

the cell (despite the fact that prison regime meant strict isolation, *blatnoys* had a right to freely walk into any cells and administrate justice. The doors for them were opened personally by the head guard of the shift – ‘a block guard’).

A kite had the same importance in the prisoners’ life. According to a popular saying, ‘a kite is the face of a prisoner’. Carelessly written word in a kite in the gaol could start a whole bunch of critically non-solvable problems, cause a cruel physical punishment to a lighthearted prisoner, ruin a crime lord’s career. The most seasoned prisoners didn’t even let crossing-outs and corrections in their kites. Some put an eyelash in the rolled kite – so the recipient knew that the kite wasn’t opened along the way (crime lords used such a perlustration to control suspicious communication of the ‘commoners’).

Saying ‘Never write what you dare not sign’ is about kites. In the gaol both oral and written word could extol or bring down (which happened more often) the one who dared to share it with the world.

Four times a day a prisoner in charge of the fishing road was receiving and sending the mail – handfuls of kites – paper capsules carefully rolled up to the size of the stub of a pencil and packed tightly in a plastic bag. In such a way, along

the regular life of cell communities, a secret epistolary life of the prison was continuously flowing through the arterial roads – *kaburas*.

Part 3. **Snow Ball**

After getting into cell 124 Wizard passionately started to practice his usual craft: he helped his cellmates to get rid of jinx, ‘cured’ them, hold hypnosis sessions, and made people stare in his eyes promising to show them ‘their demon’ and so on. Moreover, he started to gather disciples – not only in his own cell but with the help of the fishing road all around the gaol, alluring by the fact that supposedly one of his apprentices took part in a Russian copy of the TV show ‘Psychic Challenge’.

I also was offered to become his apprentice. For that I would have to do only a couple of manipulations with my blood and a mirror (he was indeed a mirror wizard) and of course give an oath of loyalty to Kostas himself.

I delicately refused.

But he had enough people in the gaol who were willing to. Wizard was in correspondence with many and described with flying colors unlimited miraculous qualities that his disciples would

have after they became ‘battle mages’ under his skillful leadership. Young prisoners were excited; they were giving him oaths of loyalty and were sending blotches of their blood in the kites.

For some time I was holding correspondence with Wizard, too, as we had been communicating while staying in triples. But truly speaking, soon I started to feel some sort of a hidden agenda in his kites. They all started with ‘Good day, Brother!’ or ‘Hi, Mate!’ and they all invariably ended by ‘Kolyan, if it is not hard for you, please, send me...’ (pens, pencils, pen refills, postcards, envelopes – in general all the things that were in short supply in the gaol and he knew I had some). Of course, a couple of times I shared with him, but Wizard’s wants were only growing, there were no kites without requests of tangible things and pretty soon I ratcheted down correspondence since such kind of ‘friendship’ was not for me.

Soon I happened to spend two weeks in cell 124 and see the life of Wizard in the community and his magical activities. I have to say that his convict’s life was not as successful as the ‘magician’s’ one. Despite the fact that he had a number of apprentices that were attracted by his silver tongue and fanciful promises, in general in his cell for six people he was a butt of a joke and a reason for constant conflicts. His excessive

chattiness and vainglory, his constant screw-ups (one time he poured water over the TV set, another time he said something out of place when the crime lords were there and later the whole house had to answer to that), his unwillingness to 'lead prison life' didn't work for Kostas's credibility at all. He tried to make up his authority by telling the stories of his powerful grandma, about his deadly curses and how once two foes beat him up and both soon tragically died. It didn't work well. But with the arrival of new people (couple of guys and me) to the cell his mercantile character manifested to the full. Before he had been driving the cellmates mad by telling them about his future pig farm that was supposed to make him rich within a couple of years and he even found partners for the business right there in the house. And now after he found out that my cellmate (the one who, like me, was temporarily transferred to cell 124) had some property in a village, he suggested that he secured it for Kostas in exchange for magic abilities the latter could hand down to him. Somehow he decided that I also was an owner of expensive property so he offered me to give away everything to him and get an amulet instead that would make any wish come true. Any wish! The question why he couldn't do such an amulet for himself and get out of the prison just hung in the air.

Shortly after my return to the previous cell the relations of Kostas and his cell mates became strained and he had to move to another cell. It was preceded by the visit of *blatnoys* to cell 124, they had a preventive talk with Wizard and officially prohibited his sorcery.

But in a new one, in cell 120 Wizard didn't linger. Trying to show that he was much more than he actually was he didn't get on with the cellmates and was clearly told that he needed to look for another cell for himself. It is worth noting that in the gaol, as in any cell system, frequent moves from one cell to another had a very negative effect on the prisoner's reputation as it was considered that if he couldn't get along with one community, he wouldn't get along with another one either. So every new house strengthened the negative reputation of a prisoner.

Cell 123 - one of the biggest in the block - became a new refuge of Wizard. It was considered a certain 'settling tank' where *blatnoys* would set those who couldn't get along in other houses, the prisoners who 'screwed up' ('played-outs', 'rats' and such), bird-brain and slightly insane prisoners, and those who couldn't 'chip in to the common fund' (to give *blatnoys* tea, cigarettes and so on). Psychological climate in such houses was matching their dwellers, it was a tense, evil,

aggressive (even in terms of the gaol) environment. Every man defended his own interests.

As I have already mentioned, crime lords were doing rounds through the cells from time to time, calling on their ward 'commoners', or '*kozyols*', as they often called them among themselves. Upon such rounds the houses in need got all the necessities (tea and cigarettes), important news and innovations, prisoners were also given instructions on how to deal with the cops and, of course, the justice was enforced: conflicts were solved, those who screwed up were physically punished or given a strict reprimand. And for sure for impudent, self-confident crime lords such rounds were an opportunity to raise themselves once again above the 'commoners'. Three or four 'gangrels' walking skanky and with self-satisfied air in expansive non-prison clothes (while everyone was obliged to wear uniform) entered the cells disrupting their set rhythm of life and right away started to make nipping and mocking comments to all those they thought needed it. Nobody dared to object them to anything, answer back or get into a row. The slightest attempt to set yourself on the same level as crime lords led to a reminder of your status in the best case, in the worst case – to a slap in your face, that's why most of the

prisoners rushed to make tea and take sweets and expensive cigarettes out of the shelves that were stored specially for the visit of *blatnoys*. *Blatnoys* saw that cons were afraid of them and it boosted their self-esteem even more.

Upon one of such rounds in the spring of 2014 criminals visited cell 123. At that time Wizard had a row with the cops and served his 10 days in the dungeon. During the conversation the *blatnoys* (good judges of characters) quickly noticed that something wasn't right in the cell. Some half words. They didn't overlook grungy exchanges of looks, odd tints of tones. A cup of strong tea passed around the circle didn't lower the pressure. Vova the Bald-coot, the enforcer in the prison, decided to 'break the wall' right away:

'Is everything alright in your cell?'

'Yes, yes, everything is okay!' the 'commoners' hastily nodded.

But, of course, you couldn't trust them. They were hiding something.

'Is there understanding!?' Bald-coot repeated sullenly looking into the frightened eyes.

And there Martyn who moved to the cell recently intervened:

'On the whole, everything is alright, as it should be. But in general, there is not enough understanding in the cell'.

‘Finally’ - Bald-coot must have thought at the moment. But Martyn didn’t want to explain what he meant, he was too afraid. At that time Shara, an assistant of Bald-coot, transferred Martyn to a different cell where Martyn gave the whole picture: in a community of 12 people the most impudent one – Poacher - with the term of 25 years that he got right in the court – stood out. The house had already been divided into conflicting groups, but he destroyed even that fragile order. He gathered around himself a small bunch of guys like himself and they started to defend their interest by fists and kicks, by beating up cellmates because of various reasons: that one ate too much bread, that one said something wrong. These cases were not reported to *blatnoys* – maybe because of the common agreement, or because of the fear of Poacher, although according to all the rules, such a thing should be reported to *blatnoys* immediately. So they lived like that, fighting for food and being afraid of those who had bigger fists. Sure thing such a state of affairs was unacceptable for the crime lords. In *blatnoy* system, just like in the state one, the monopoly of the authority on violence is a crucial element. According to the code, crime lords could beat up ‘commoners’ but ‘commoners’ were not allowed to beat each other.

Shara got back into cell 123, Bald-coot was there all the time. Poacher was beaten and thrown out of the cell. The investigation continued on the following day. Wizard was taken out of the de-seg to the cell on the first floor. They fixed him tea, treated him with chocolate. Casually Bald-coot asked how they lived in cell 123?

‘We lived okay, everything was alright’, Wizard answered without sensing a hidden agenda.

‘Are you sure it was okay?’ Bald-coot specified. ‘Maybe were there some problems?’

‘No, Vova, there were no problems! All was as usual!’ Wizard continued to tank himself further.

But in the dungeons physical punishment was prohibited by the code. After his time in the de-seg came to an end Wizard got a couple of days for ‘thinking over’ and when he got back to cell 123, he got slapped in the face with the words ‘for lying to *blatnoys*’. That would have been the right time for him to calm down, but it seemed that he was so sure that the higher powers were protecting him, that he continued his game and wrote a kite to his former cellmate Martyn (he was in a different cell by that time): ‘Why did you tell everything to *blatnoys*, why did you rat out Poacher as we all had agreed to keep silence?’ Martyn wasn’t confused by

getting this kite and out of all options he chose the most sure-fire one. He carefully rolled it up and sent to *blatnoys*.

Bald-coot with his escort was beating hell out of Kostas diligently and for a long time on the wooden floor of cell 123, they broke him two teeth and made him eat that ill-fated kite. The above-mentioned Shara was so diligent at beating Wizard (who was twice smaller than he) that he tore his snickers in the process. However, later on, trying to cover up all his sins, Kostas sent Shara a new pair of shoes in a parcel. Sure it meant that he told his parents and they sent the shoes.

Kostas Sarkisyan was set free in May 2015 and as far as I know until his release he didn't do any magic.

Epilogue

From the cradle and till the death everything kind, harmo-nious and truthful that surrounds us dictates us simple and comprehensible rules of humane communal living: do not tell a lie, do not covet what belongs to others, do not act slyly, and do not use other people as your means. In general, treat others like you want to be treated. Almost all world religions talk about it, too. Every

one of us to a lesser or greater degree breaks these rules: the necessity to survive among imperfect people forces us to make a compromise with our conscience. However, if deception and self-interest become a central axis around which all your life goes, sooner or later you will inevitably be tangled in your own lies and come up to a very unhappy upshot. It will happen not in the mythical hell, but here in this life. And quite often the snow ball that will roll over you won't be connected with your actions at all at the first glance. 'The ways of God are inscrutable' says a Christian on that. A simple minded villain will tell 'Bad luck, fuck it'. But I believe that one day scientists will figure out the explanation of why after completing an incomprehensible circle along our social connections, after casually bumping into actions and intentions of others, our actions and even intentions return to us triplicated: by cute gifts of fortune, if we were kind from the start, or by cruel punishments, if we carried rancor, rage and self-interest initially. And I also think that they will explain why in a normal life a cycle of that circle may take dozens of years, and in some places (truly enchanted ones) it goes with a tremendous speed.

* * *

I found Wizard in social network Vkontakte in about a year after release. As a profile picture he had a 'mysterious' picture of a mage in fantasy style. His status message read "IDON'T PRACTICE MAGIC FOR MONEY!!! I CHOSE APPRENTICIES ON MY OWN!!!" So I sent him a message.

'Hey, brother!' he answered back. 'How are you? How is your health, mate?' he was pouring flattery titles one after another. 'And where do you live? Here is my number, let's talk over the phone!' his mateyness was just over the charts. We talked about the gaol, about friends in common, about that story. According to him, he was punished then not because of deception, but because of sorcery against the prison's deputy governor on disciplinary affairs, when the latter wrote him up for the de-seg. Wizard stretched his arm to him with the words, 'Let you be cursed by a curse of Satan. Let all your children be stillborn!' And the officer Vladimirovich ran to blatnoys to complain and they beat Kostas up and asked him, 'Will you practice witchcraft again!?'

However, pretty soon Wizard changed the subject to more practical topics and shared with me that he was living in Moscow and wanted to start a company for clearing souls off the sins. The full 'sin-clearing' of one soul would cost 20 000 euros, but

the effect would be breathtaking: not a single sin on a soul, it would become crystal clear as baby's tears! But Moscow was just a starting point of his business plan. He would open up branches in other post-Soviet countries, himself would stay in Europe and would just collect all the money, and the work would be done by his apprentices, battle mages. He later wrote me, 'Everyone who takes part in the start-up will become dollar millionaires in less than a year!' To start the project Kostas was missing just one tiny thing – an initial capital (Wizard himself worked as a night guard and lived at his relatives') – somewhat around 5000 dollars. On my surprised question how I could help him with that as I was living on my scholarship and earned extra as a journalist, he answered also surprised:

'But your politicians have been investing in you!'

With a thick distrust in his look he listened to my attempts to prove that politicians do not support anarchists financially and once again advised me to think and invest into his business as I could become a millionaire 'in less than a year'!

I delicately refused.

Transgressors' Isolation Centre in Minsk
March 30 – April 7, 2017

LIFE IS BEAUTIFUL

Another 10 days of the punishment cell in Shklov colony No. 17. This time I was lucky: I'm not alone in the cell, there are three of us. It's warmer like that, because the radiators are almost cold, and it's more fun - there is someone to spend the time with. One of my neighbours is a young pal with a one-year term, he is to be released in five days. The other one is Sanya aka 'Pilot'. His hair is grey, though he must be under forty. Lived-in voice. Old wolf's look. He's been inside for thirteen years, and seven more are ahead - it's for domestic homicide. In those ten days that we spent together, I heard a lot of interesting things from him, like how he got to serve in the army before his imprisonment (his service fell right within the period of Soviet decay). I learned how at the beginning of his stretch he used to be a 'blatnoy' in Orsha correctional colony No. 8, where he was a witness of the 'black course' - wrangles among the 'blatnoys' right inside the pen, almost free access to mobile phones, cops ready to bring any drugs for bribes. He remembered how cons used to stay in the punishment cell according to the system 'one day the weather is flyable - the other it is not', i.e. one day they were fed on hot food, the other - on a slice of bread and a cup of hot water; and many other things.

But it was not the stories, but the philosophy of the Pilot that burnt into my memory.

One day I felt a bit down. I don't remember the reason anymore, either after another sleepless night, or after routine screw's tricks, but the irritation that had been accumulating for many days finally burst out in a stream of rudderless abuse of the institution, the screws and generally of our former situation. Pilot was listening. Then he agreed:

'You bet your ass. The pen here is cockish. It is no match for the number eight! In the morning while everyone's asleep, I used to go out to the yard and sit on a bench sipping a tea... The sun is shining, birds are singing. The mood is fucking awesome... Don't you worry. Soon you'll get back to the ward-type housing unit, make yourself some tea... And you've got just a bit¹. Cut the shit, man...'

He was silent for a moment, then looked at me with his tired and a bit mad eyes and added:

'Life is beautiful. Even in here...'

Life is beautiful. Even in here... This phrase struck with a hammer and at the same time rang the bell in my head creating an invisible explosion in the neural networks. I clammed up. With every minute I got the meaning of it more and more.

1 Short sentence.

Just imagine a stifling gloomy concrete box in which you are doing push-ups and squats to warm up and get some sleep and in which you stay as long as the governor wants. Outside the 'box' is the colony with an aggressive and mostly wily and obedient population, people that one shouldn't turn ones back upon, and in addition to them - you are accustomed to screws who act with impunity, who have sadistic tendencies and who don't see a person in you. There are no rights, there is no freedom, no wife that would come for visits, no wellbeing or simple human joy. And it's been thirteen years like that, seven more are ahead. But 'Life is beautiful. Even in here...'

This willpower and lust for life struck and inspired me with great respect to this person. How much vitality, craving for freedom and moral courage he must have to reason like that in his situation, and how awkward it is to feel unhappy with your lot for most of those who think that they have problems in life!

Much later, when in Mogilev prison after number seventeen with its 'blatnoys' and 'crime lords', when the censors and operatives were throwing out my mail in bulk trying to isolate me from the outside, when screws in Zhodino

were putting me up against the wall, hitting my legs and handcuffing me for the fact that I was a 'political', when in the prison I wasn't getting out of the dungeons for twenty days, when I got one more year of imprisonment five days before my release, when in Gorky colony they deprived me of visits from relatives and the lawyer, every time, sooner or later, when I really wanted to take it hard, become sad or feel sorry for myself, the Pilot's face appeared in front of my eyes and I heard his words:

'Life is beautiful. Even in here...'

January 2016



Life is beautiful. Even here.

AN OPEN LETTER

In any prison, officers spend their time preventing convicts from fighting for their rights. As well as the use of physical intimidation, a big part of this involves the isolation of convicts from the prison community and sources of information. In the middle of November 2014, while doing my time in solitary in Mogilev prison, I learned that a new criminal case under Article 411 was opened against me. This meant that my forthcoming release was postponed by another year. I was not able to influence this situation, other than killing myself so they have no one to try. The only reasonable way of fighting was with a sheet of paper and a pen. I had to, as much as possible, attract public attention - including the international public - to the existence of this article and its practical application against political and common prisoners fighting for their rights. This is how the idea to write an open letter to the media leapt to mind.

Writing was not even half the battle, but perhaps one tenth of it. How to get it to the outside? Prison administration rarely lets out even official complaints to the Department of Corrections, never mind devastating letters to

the media. I had to resort to a trick that I can't disclose here. I will only say that as a result I experienced intense shakedowns before going to see my lawyer, and threats to put me in a worse cell. But I didn't really worry about it – I had pulled it off.

The letter, written in March 2015 was translated into Russian and English thanks to my parents and comrades, and was handed to representatives of the European Union in Belarus, diplomats from the US Embassy, published in *Narodnaya Volya* newspaper and a bunch of other Belarusian online media¹.

‘Greetings! My name is Mikalai Dziadok. I am writing this letter to all those for whom the words ‘justice’, ‘humanism’ and ‘human dignity’ are not an empty phrase.

1 After the trials of most political prisoners (including anarchists) had ended, the EU and the USA initiated a political campaign against Belarusian president Lukashenko, demanding the liberation of all political prisoners in Belarus. It involved political and economic sanctions against members of the government, special agencies, police executives and judges who were banned from entering the EU and whose economic activity was frozen in all European countries. In the end Lukashenko had to release a lot of political prisoners, but not anarchists, so Mikalai tried to attract attention of the diplomats through oppositional media.

On February 26 this year, I was sentenced under Part 1 of Article 411 of the Criminal Code to one year of imprisonment. The title of this article is 'Willful disobedience to the requirements of the administration of a correctional facility'. The sentence was handed down in prison just five days before the end of my previous term, 4 years and 6 months. I noted that I received the maximum penalty under this article. In 2012, a former political prisoner Zmitser Dashkevich was convicted under the same article.

What was my 'crime'? 16 disciplinary violations in almost 2 years in Prison No. 4, in particular; wearing a tracksuit, talking to inmates in neighbouring cells and walking around the cell after 10 p.m. It is also important to note that for each of the 16 violations I was reprimanded, either receiving a warning or five to ten days in a punishment cell, thus serving sixty days in a punishment cell of this prison alone.

The Constitution, the Criminal Code and the Correctional Code of Belarus declare a lot of good principles and rights, but they are trampled into the mud when Article 411 of the Criminal Code is in action. It allows them to send a person to a correctional colony for

one year (or two years under the second part of this article), for wearing or not wearing certain clothes, or for a conversation with your cellmate. Is there such a terrible and absurd legal norm elsewhere in the world?!

Initially, Article 411 of the Criminal Code was introduced to deal with crime bosses in penitentiaries and the internal prison laws inherited by Belarus from the Soviet era. Today, however, these internal laws are almost universally defeated by the administrations of prisons and colonies, and the article was and is increasingly being used against political prisoners and other inmates fighting for their rights. The very wording of the article opens up a space for moral violence and violation of human dignity. Here is an example: a prison inspector spits on the ground and gives a convict a mop to clean it up. The latter refuses. Four such refusals are enough for criminal prosecution! One of the convicts told me this story, and even if it is not quite true or exaggerated - everything in it is within the law, and this is the worst thing about it. In full accordance with the law, a prisoner can be put in prison for four refusals to perform work that humiliates him! I do not know of even a single case of acquittal under Article 411.

In general, human rights violations and abuses in Belarusian prisons have reached such a scale that they have become a system and a habit, they should be described in a whole book, not a single letter! However, I don't want to be overambitious in this appeal, and so I will focus on the effects of Article 411.

This scope for arbitrary actions of prison administrations is created by the Interior Ministry's Internal Rules of Conduct (IRC), which should be followed by each convict. However, convicts are not familiarised with the entire rules, only part of them, and they are told that the rest of the document is 'for official use'. This does not prevent the administration from demanding full observance of the rules by the convicts. The rules themselves are written in a manner that allows the punishment of anyone at any time for things such as: being unshaven, wearing dirty clothes or shoes, unbuttoned collars, improper greeting or not greeting a representative of the administration, not standing up in the presence of prison authorities and so on. Often violations reports are simply falsified, and then try proving that your shoes were actually clean! It is for such 'violations' that Belarusian political prisoners continue to be put in disciplinary segregation, secure housing unit and deprived of family visits.

These prisoners include: Ihar Alinevich, Artsiom Prakapenka, Yauhen Vaskovich and Mikalai Statkevich².

Moreover, strict compliance with the rules is demanded only from those who 'stand out' in some way: political prisoners and those who dare to speak about their rights. The others have more or less quiet lives – as long as they are silent. I have observed the application of Article 411 so many times, and it was always out of revenge to a prisoner for his indomitable will, or for the defense of his rights, and never anything else.

In their official publications, correctional officers - though it would be more correct to call them punitive - constantly repeat that they took the best from the Soviet penal system. It is true, if to you the best things are a total disregard for the individual, ruthless suppression of prisoners' will, promoting divisions into castes and roles and the use of fear as the only method of control. The President of Belarus likes to say that Belarus is the centre of Europe. But why then does this 'centre' brutally ignore its international commitments - not least the Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees respect for human dignity, the right

2 Two anarchists, a nationalist and an ex-candidate for presidency convicted at that time.

to humane treatment and a fair trial? A convict in Belarus is a powerless and dependent creature, whose fate is entirely in the hands of the officials of the penitentiary and the Department of Corrections. If they want to, they will put you in a remand prison, secure housing unit or transfer to a prison. They can lower the status of a convict so that he will cease to exist as a person for others (this is done by loyal prisoners who can execute any order), or extend their sentence. This feeling of despair and powerlessness is difficult to convey – it can only be felt.

Of course, I would really like to shout to the whole world about the injustice caused to me by the punitive system, but I do want to be the last convict under Article 411. Therefore, I appeal to the international and Belarusian human rights agents, to all international organisations interested in human rights, and to concerned people of Belarus: do everything possible for the repeal of Article 411 of the Criminal Code. The Belarusian society is atomised, constrained by fear and conformism. Separate groups can barely defend their economic rights, and those who are trying to protect their political rights are subject to endless repression. However, I am convinced that the Belarusian people will wake up and realize that ‘those who would give up essential Liberty, to purchase a

little temporary Safety, deserve neither Liberty nor Safety'³, that the collective will of the people can force the state machine to listen to reason and begin to fulfill its international obligations.

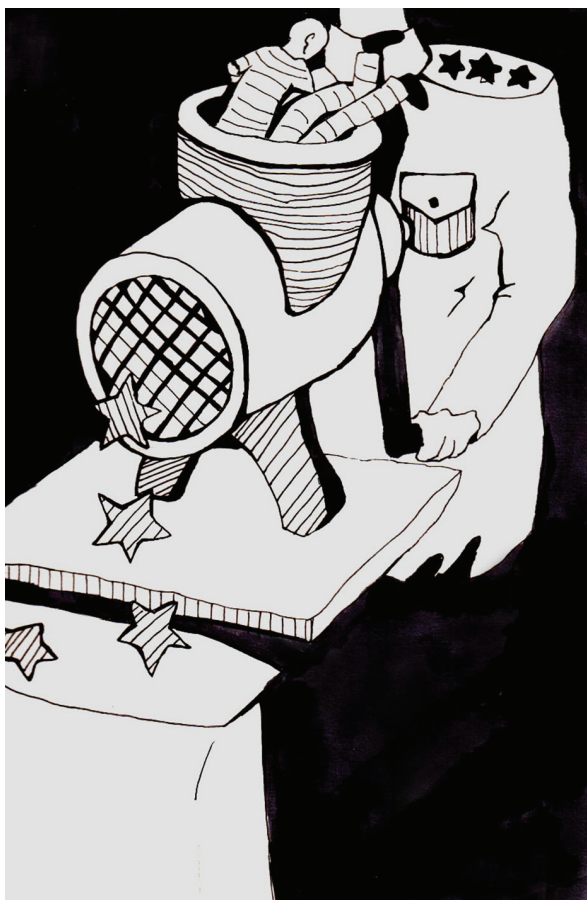
Of course, the world's attention and that of Europe today is focused on the Ukraine, where people die in tens and hundreds, and it seems that the suffering of the five political prisoners in a relatively stable and peaceful Belarus is a small matter. However, let's not forget that the events in the Ukraine began largely due to the lack of respect for human dignity, the attempts to impose on society a life of fear and an anti-democratic system of values. What are we witnessing in Belarus, if not the same thing?

I therefore send to you, and all those who have the power and ability to influence the situation, my hope that what is happening to me will not happen to anyone else in Belarus.

Mikalai Dziadok
Prison No. 4

March 2015'.

3 A quote by Benjamin Franklin.



THE LAST RESORT

‘Why do you have scars on your arms? Did you try to kill yourself?’ people ask me from time to time. Many people don’t understand why inmates harm themselves while in prison and what the meaning of it is.

In the prison etiquette there is a concept ‘the last resort’. This includes hunger strike and self-harm. According to the informal prison rules, the last resort is applied in three cases: danger to life, danger to health and danger to personal dignity. The logic of such actions is simple: by putting his life in danger an inmate forces the administration to hospitalise him and thus temporarily avoids staying in a critical situation, since for a dead con the authorities of prison can lambaste a screw or other staff: take them to task, de-bonus, sometimes even fire them.

It was danger to health that forced me to use the last resort in 2015. From the very beginning, things didn’t click with the administration of Gorky colony No. 9 where I was brought after the conviction under art. 411 and a new one-year sentence. This was not surprising - they didn’t bring me there to quietly do my time. Among cons the Gorky colony is considered ‘a

jawboning colony', where inmates who stand out from the general crowd (politicals, unruly crime lords, enthusiasts that like to complain about the incarceration conditions) are jawboned particularly harshly.

Hardly had I come to the colony, when vexations started: I went to bed too early (30 minutes before the lights-out), refused to clean the toilets (meaning that I refused to perform the task of a 'petukh'), didn't greet the staff properly and so on. 'Ten days in the de-seg', this is what I heard from the governor. But I should say that things didn't go smoothly in the de-seg either. I spent my first term with other inmates, and already there was astonished by the aloofness and cynicism of the administration in regard to everything that concerns the needs of inmates. I thought that after four and a half years in prison nothing could surprise me. It turned out to be not true. For example, after the first ten days in the de-seg a duty officer took me out not at the exact time when my punishment was to be over - around 7 pm - but almost three hours later. I spent a long time in the de-seg in different colonies, and I've never faced anything like that. The screw didn't react to my concerns about the fact that my punishment was over. Thus, I should have gotten to the section, shaved, washed myself

(because I could not do any of this properly in the de-seg) and made it until the lights-out scheduled for 10 pm. If I hadn't made it, I would have received a ticket in the morning for not being shaven, and generally it's not so nice to go to bed without washing yourself. So I decided that cleanliness was more important than the routine and because I was freshening myself up, I went to bed a bit later than 10 pm. This is what the screws were waiting for and came to the section five minutes after the lights-out and wrote me up for 'not following the lights-out command'. And now they had a violation of the rules, for which you can be sent to the de-seg again! Such impudence made me angry. Not only had they kept me in segregation three hours longer than I was supposed to stay there, but they also stealthily set me up for committing another violation!

Another unpleasant experience had to do with Gorky's medics. According to the law, a doctor was to make his round in the de-seg twice a day, to make sure everyone feels well. In the de-seg of colony No. 9 the doctor did the round only once every day apart from Sunday. On Saturday, staying in the de-seg, I caught a cold and on the following day started to ask for a doctor, because it's not so comfortable to sleep on the plank floor with a fever and cough. To all my requests the screw had one

reply: 'The doctor is not here, today is Sunday!' Cons also confirmed that the doctor doesn't do the rounds on Sundays. But I knew it was lies. In every colony on any day of the week and at any time there is a duty doctor, and only by lousy custom of this facility he couldn't be bothered to get out of his office in the infirmary and walk five hundred metres just to bring some pills to some con - perhaps, the latter won't die till tomorrow!

But even all this is an insufficient reason for the last resort. The reason appeared after I was sent to the de-seg for refusing to work. That time I was staying alone in a very peculiar cell - it was situated a metre away from the seat of the guard. This was done allegedly to control me better. But the main thing was that it was a corner house situated in the corner of the barrack. One might wonder, what is the difference? A cell is a cell everywhere. But a regular visitor to the de-seg knows the difference very well. The cops know it too. The thing is that corner cells are the most damp and cold. They are cold even in summer, let alone winter¹. When

1 It was actually in winter that I had to spend a month and a half in a corner cell in Mogilev gaol. Condensation appeared on the walls because of dampness. Flowing down the walls it produced a piece of ice in the corner of the cell which was growing fast if you didn't remove it. We wore body-warmers 24 hours a day.

back then, on May 19, I was locked in cell 16, I immediately closed the window, hoping that by the night-time my breath will have brought the room to a more or less acceptable temperature. But these hopes were misplaced.

The most difficult night in my life began. After the lights-out I lay down on the floor and realised it wasn't plank at all. It was so cold and rough that I first thought it was concrete. But having picked it open in one place I realised the floor was made of chipboard, which is also a law violation, because according to the regulations, the floor in the de-seg and SHU must be plank.

The first 'round' of sleep lasted for about thirty minutes. It was the longest one as well. Later I wasn't able to sleep longer than fifteen minutes, the omnipresent feeling of cold would not allow it. That night I realised how biting and relentless the cold can be: taking every grain of warmth one by one from your body, it forces the mind to think of nothing else other than how to get warmer. This compulsive idea pulses in your head like a woodpecker who never finishes his work; it feels like an always hungry predator whose hunger cannot be sated. Cold, really cold. The cold is in your arms, legs, back, nose and ears. Trousers tucked into socks and jacket tucked into trousers don't help any longer. Around the middle

of the night traditional 'warm-ups' - push-ups and squats - stop helping as well. The body doesn't have any free calories in stock to process them into warmth. On top of that, after a few hundred push-ups and squats there was no energy to do them any longer. The situation became desperate. Closer to the morning (this is how it felt, though I didn't have a watch) I started experiencing peculiar 'sleep hallucinations': I was dreaming that I was asleep at home under a wide warm blanket. I feel very good and comfortable, pleasant and light... A thought pierces my mind: why would I worry so much, jump, do push-ups and squats, if I sleep so well? Here my brain gives a command to wake up. I open my eyes and my whole body is shaking with heavy and painful shivers: I finally understand where I am and that I need to stand up again and try to squeeze some active movements from myself to increase the temperature of the body and sleep for at least a few more minutes. The atmosphere and general experience was enhanced by bright electric light of two bulbs hanging from the ceiling. The lights were left on in the de-seg, and I felt like I was in some amalgam of madhouse and torture chamber.

Finally, the morning came. I ate and was hoping to sleep in order to somehow compensate the hours I wasn't able to sleep at night and get

back to normal. The guard, of course, wrote me up for that (and that ticket added several more days to my segregation), but I didn't care anymore.

After the morning check round I lay down and realised that I was naively mistaken: even the daytime temperature in the cell didn't allow for normal sleeping. So it turned out that I couldn't sleep either during the day, or at night. I remembered the agonising night and realised that there were at least nine nights like that ahead and, most probably, even more, because the governor for sure would add more punishment. Then I realised that something was to be done.

During the day I was constantly demanding from the duty associate governor who sometimes came by to the de-seg to move me to another cell. The arguments were that the temperature here was lower than should be according to the law, and the floor was from chipboard, while it should be plank, and that was another violation. He would listen to my requests and drop indifferently: 'We'll see...' or 'I'll clarify...', but the situation didn't change. Meanwhile, I understood that if I spent nine more nights like this in the de-seg, I would leave it with a multitude of ills in addition to the ones I had. I needed to leave by any means necessary. I prepared a razor blade that I brought

on me to the de-seg despite the shakedown (thanks to the advice of old-timers) and started to make a plan. Originally it was the following: just after the evening check round I would cut my veins on both arms and the stomach. The main thing was to cut properly, not just scratch myself: I had seen a lot of those who 'harmed themselves' by scratching their arms and the cops just laughed at them - they would bandage you right in the cell and wouldn't even ask what you wanted. In order not to freeze in this house, I had to cut myself seriously, but at the same time not too much, because if I did, I could freeze forever. I decided to do the following: first I reach the veins on my arms, scarify them, pour the blood out into my half-litre mug until it's full (a man can survive after losing up to half of their blood, and I have five litres inside), then I empty it out under the door of the cell (right after the check round there will be the duty assistant governor and a guard - they will notice it for sure), and then I cut open my stomach (two fingers down the belly-button, this is how I was taught), ideally all the way through to the abdominal cavity, depends on the pain limit.

For the hundredth time I asked to be moved to another cell and understood they would not do it and I had to get onto action.

My schemes from the very start were foiled by an unexpected shift in the check round, as a result of which I decided not to wait and started to cut myself earlier.

I hid behind the 'armour' (a screen between the toilet and the rest of the house) so that they couldn't see me through the peephole, crossed myself, took the razor blade and made the first cut on my left arm. Was it scary? Of course, it was. But I understood what I did and why. Contrary to expectations, blood didn't come out in fountain, but instead a few drops appeared and then fused into a tiny trickle - I spilled just a little into the mug. Then I began to make not simple cuts, but cuts-strokes, so that the thin blade penetrated as deep as possible. A few times I had to strike twice in the same cut to make it wider. Some cuts turned out quite successful: a good half centimetre deep and a centimetre wide. But there was still too little blood. Maybe it left the periphery of the body and flew inside from excitement? They say there is such a biological mechanism of adaptation to danger... Finally, cops lingered at my house - the check round! I hid my arms behind my back, came out of the 'armour' and stood at attention like an obedient con. Now the most important thing was that they didn't notice it - it's too early!

‘Good evening’, said the duty assistant governor.

‘Good evening. Dziadok. Everything alright’.

‘You sure about that?’ I see distrust in cop’s eyes.

‘I am’, I smile.

The cop looks around the cell fishily...

‘Why are you not wearing a uniform?’ before they entered I didn’t manage to put on the jacket and was in a t-shirt.

‘I didn’t manage to put in on, you entered so fast!’ I smile again and think to myself, ‘God, I hope they don’t spot the drops on the floor!’

Finally, the door closes and I’m laughing inside at how I made fools of them. Dorks!

But the alertness of the guard let me down. I immediately went behind the ‘armour’, and the guard, probably instinctively, sensed that something was wrong and continued looking into the peephole instead of going to another cell. He obviously saw either blood, or my arm that showed itself from behind the ‘armour’. I heard the scream behind the door, ‘He’s cutting himself!’ In a few seconds the cop unlocks the first lock. I realise that the time is up, take the razor blade in the other hand and quickly, with all my might cut my right arm. The cop begins to open the second lock, on the bar. I’m so lucky it is a screw lock! This gives me a few seconds more, I lower down my trousers and with the greatest

possible pressure strike with the blade over my stomach. I manage to do that three times before the cops burst into the cell. I throw the blade into the sink, and it is quite successful, because it goes into the drain at once.

The duty assistant governor and the guard stand and watch. Blood is coming down both my arms and stomach. They take out hand-cuffs and put them on me. They bring me to the exercise yard, it's walking time actually. I sit and find myself a bit shocked... Now the most important thing is that they fulfill my demands. But I regret that everything went against my plan. Well, so it goes - it worked out in some way.

Ten minutes pass. I hear the conversation of inmates who call to one another from different yards:

'Listen, what's the fuss? Why are cops bustling?'

'Dziadok has cut himself!'

'Who?'

'Dziadok!'

'Who's that?'

'A political'.

'Dziadok is here!' I enter the conversation.

'Why did you cut yourself?'

We fall into talk. I explained to them my general situation in the colony, listened to their advice...

Finally, a 'triplet' comes into my yard: head of the operative department, head of the security department and head of the medical wing. The security officer tells me to undress - they start to search me. They are only interested in one thing: how did I smuggle the blade? Of course, I don't tell them that. They probed everything, including the elastic webbing on my underpants, looked at my heels (what if I have something stuck there?) to make sure I don't have any razor blades and only after that they asked what the reason of my action was.

I lost patience: very emotionally I told them they really overdid it with carrying out the KGB orders and voiced my demands: I need to be moved to any other cell. They listened. The operative asked everyone to leave and ordered the removal of the handcuffs. We were left one on one. The door to the yard closed and he asked me with irritation:

'What do you want?' By virtue of his operative nature he can't believe that my demands are the ones I've just mentioned, he thinks I have something else in mind.

Such a question confuses me at first.

'I will not tell you what I want, because you will always do your best for me not to get this', was my answer. I didn't see a point in asking him for

more, anyway, I will not be granted acceptable incarceration conditions.

I heard wordy unfinished hints from the operative, like: 'Don't you understand who you are?' (meaning they will jawbone me anyway), 'There are certain rules of the game...' (I still can't understand what he meant by that). He also attempted to convince me to live according to their rules: the operative said that even a former crime lord Galey - 'a respectable man' - goes to the industry area to work. I didn't hear a definitive promise to move me to another house from him.

Finally they brought me to the doctor. They ripped off the clothes from my arms and stomach which had almost dried on, and then started counseling whether they needed to stitch the cuts or a simple bandage would be enough. They decided to apply a bandage: then the incident can be qualified as a slight accident, because if they had stitched me, it would have meant that the wounds were serious. This was detrimental for the local administration who, as I later learned, reported this situation to the top officials - the Minister of Interior.

After the dressing I was brought to the house... The same house. And there I made another mistake. Instead of refusing to enter it, I believed

the duty assistant governor who said that the matter of my transfer to another cell ‘was being decided’. The cell was turned upside down: my entire modest belongings were ransacked, the rubbish bin was turned over right on the floor. They were looking for the blade. It was about 7 pm...

Approximately every half an hour I began to bang at the door and ask why I wasn’t transferred. They palmed me off with promises to do it ‘very soon’. But when the lights-out time came, I realised that I had been deceived: they decided to turn high-minded, like, ‘he is being uncompromising, and we will not surrender’.

I had a ‘plan B’ for such developments.

In cell 16 before me there was a former crime lord Dima Galejev (Galey) who was extradited from Sweden to be put into a Belarusian prison. The Ministry of Interior wanted something special from him in their criminal games. As a result, the cell was stuffed with different things that you can’t usually find in the de-seg. One of them I noticed from the very beginning: near the toilet there was a crooked stick of uncertain origin and purpose (probably for ‘working together’ through the disposal system between cells). I took a cloth and covered the peephole in the door so the guard couldn’t see what I’m doing.

I took the stick, pushed it through the grating surrounding the bulb under the ceiling. With the stick I hoped to crash the bulb, cut myself with a glass fragment and cut my legs as well - there are more veins on them and they are more dense. This time they will transfer me to the infirmary, there is no way around it! After a few strikes the bulb started swinging (it hung on a cable), but wouldn't crash. A strike on the grating, another one, it clings but still is not smashed! I couldn't get enough swing on the stick either, it is limited by a 'square' of steel bars through which I had pushed it. I hear the duty assistant governor shout, 'He is swinging the "accordion"! Unlock the door!' The officer and two guards run into the cell and quickly understand what I am up to. They grab my arms and put me against the wall. I'm angry at their deception and because my plan didn't work out again, I can't control myself and start shouting at them and threatening with all deadly retributions. The duty assistant governor commands, 'Get the handcuffs!' They try to round me up. I resist as much as I can. But there are three of them. They literally tap my hands into the handcuffs: in this tussle the fresh bandaging came off and I started bleeding again. The duty assistant governor wants to handcuff me to a metal stool. There are no sharp objects

in the cell, but even if there were, I realised that being handcuffed I will not reach them, so I have to promise not to cut myself again.

The cops leave, and I stay in the cell handcuffed. The battle is lost, but not the war. In half an hour the doctor comes and applies another bandage. The lights are out, I go to sleep as is; 'chained'. After some time cops come and take off the 'bracelets'.

That night I slept really badly again - apart from cold, pain was torturing me. And I couldn't really do push-ups with cut arms. But nature made me a present - right on the following day the weather got much warmer and the rest of my time in the de-seg was more or less bearable.

In a few weeks I they had another file on me. Apart from a preventive record categorised as 'inclined to hostage taking' I became 'inclined to committing suicide'. Bullshit, if I wanted to kill myself, I would cut my veins lengthwise, not crosswise.

On the following day there had been a new development: they locked up the 'enforcer' of the pen and his assistant, and they made a shakedown in the entire barrack of the de-seg and SHU. They threw away unsophisticated 'forbidden items' of the inmates: pills, magazines, 'extra' clothing, threads, cords and stuff like that, and

didn't forget to remind that this was happening because 'the political had cut himself'. In such an unsophisticated way cops were setting other cons on me.

* * *

What is the moral of the fable? The is only one moral: if you go to the de-seg, bring two razor blades.

July 2016



THE RELEASE

*I dedicate it to all the past, current and future
political prisoners of progressive thoughts
with the hope that all prisons will be destroyed.*

It was a usual evening on Dobrolubova St., 16 in Gorky town. Cell number 19. Correctional colony N°9. It was August.

The dinner was over, as well as the evening inspection round. In any secure institution, the human body starts to follow the regime too: it wants to eat, sleep, drink and go to the bathroom according to the schedule. So Grinya (my cellmate) and I were preparing to perform our traditional ritual in our five square metres of space – to have an evening tea. We had plenty of tea and sweets, a week before there was shopping time. We were ready; we stored some “goodies” and were looking forward to tomorrow’s feast in honor of my birthday. In the cement box with the total sameness, there was not much joy, so coffee with chocolate was one of those things that at least from time to time made our brains emit endorphins in our blood.

We’d just finished our tea when we heard a clang of the door. That was somewhat strange. It was around 6 pm, an unreasonable time, and

usually, no one came at that time. The door opened and after it, the bars opened too. Two officers appeared at the door: a security officer and the duty assistant governor:

‘Dziadok, get all your stuff and pack. Let’s go’.

I felt alarmed. Usually, such changes didn’t end up well. Where would I go? Why? And why at that time? Sure I wasn’t in a hurry to follow the order:

‘For what should I get ready? Why? Another cell? Or another prison? What’s the matter?’

‘Pack quicker, we’ll tell you later! But take all your stuff, every single thing’.

‘Why later? Tell me now! Where are we going? I won’t go anywhere!’

But the cops refused to tell, no matter what. I don’t go; I try to solve the mystery. Another cell? What was the point? Another prison? But it was done at a different time and in a different way. Maybe against all odds, the SHU stay had been canceled and they would move me back to the camp? But why didn’t they tell it to me directly?

After quite long disputes the security officer said:

‘Kolya. Everything’s going to be alright. You’ll see. Pack’.

Of course, you cannot trust cops. But I looked him in the eyes and it seemed he wasn’t lying to me. I remembered that for the past half a year

that particular cop in that facility hadn't done anything particularly bad to me. What was I to do – I had to go, if they wanted, they would have carried me away anyway. I packed almost all my things. All the sweets, half of the envelopes, postcards, and pens I left to Grinya – he wasn't going anywhere, he needed them more than I did.

I was led out of the cell and to the checkpoint (the inner one, between different parts of the colony). On the way I asked the security officer one more time where we were going:

'Home', he answered.

Of course, I didn't believe him, the anger started to build up – you don't joke like that.

We came to the checkpoint, went up to the second floor. And I saw that all my bags that I had left in the colony (all that I wasn't allowed to keep in the cell) were there. The cop told me that I was released and they would walk me out of the facility.

It was like a blow to the head. It seemed to me like a show, I was ready to believe that a cop in a clown costume would jump out of the door and start roaring with laughter: You got owned! But nothing happened. I sat down and probably turned pale. Seeing my condition, the security officer got nervous and even wanted to call a doctor.

‘How come released? On what account? Where is the document?’ I tried to get it together and understand what was going on.

‘I don’t know anything, listen... I was told to release you and I am doing it!’

A kozyol comes to the checkpoint, takes my bags (I couldn’t take them all at once) and walks me to the checkpoint at the front gate. The cops are laughing; it is quite an unusual thing for them too. There were several coded doors at the checkpoint leading to the outside. We walked through one. Next to the second one, there was another cop behind the window, he started to verify my identity. He asked my first name, last name, date of birth, address. On the birthdate, I confused days and months and asked him, my brain was busy with the other stuff. The cop started to act up, to scream at me:

‘Can you speak or what?! I ask you! What’s hard here?!’

‘Don’t raise your voice at me! I haven’t screamed at you! I’ll tell you when I remember it! And you can look up all you need in your papers anyway!’

The hassle lasted half a minute, the cops accompanying me stopped it. But the rudeness of the cop didn’t influence my mood – I wonder that I remember it at all. They gave me a certificate

of release. In the line 'release cause' it said 'Presidential decree on pardon'. Finally, I had the whole picture...

The doors opened. In front of me, there was a free world.

Did I feel joy? Excitement? Euphoria? Nothing like that. I didn't understand what was going on around me. I was anxious, suspicious. I was shocked. 'Like a fish out of water' would be the best way to describe my condition in that moment. It seemed I should have been happy that finally something I had waited for so long happened and that it happened so quickly and unconditionally. But I was lost. I left the world where there were total predictability and order. Confidence in the future (do not laugh!). The world with bars of Bobruisk halvah at the shop, the library once a week, cellmate Grinya with his stories. I had known how to move, how to live, what to be sure of and of what not. And then I was in a new universe and I had no idea what to expect there.

There was an old 'Lada' next to the entrance. And there were two guys next to it. KGBs, for sure. They approached me.

'Get in, let's go'.

'Ok, let's go', I threw my bags in the trunk.

I tried to get them to talk, asked what department they were, locals or not. They kept silent. The sun was going down. I was glued to the

window. I couldn't believe it. Fields, forest. Some cows were grazing. It was like watching a movie. No, it couldn't be possibly happening to me.

Throughout the trip, I didn't ask them once where we were going. I decided it was either Orsha or Mogilev. We arrived at the train station in Orsha. I went to the bathroom, changed my clothes there: I had lots of warm clothes on me, almost all that I had been allowed. And suddenly it was hot there. No, not hot, but comfortable. I wasn't cold. In the cell you are never comfortable, it is almost all the time too cold (and you put on tons of layers) or too hot (and you are in your underwear). And there it was normal and there was no need to wrap myself up in layers... I had to take off extra ones. And there I also threw away half of my stuff. Before I left the camp I had tried to leave it for those who would need it, even to brats. The cops hadn't let me. I had no desire to bring all that junk home! An old padded jacket, quilted pants (all handmade from the gaol), slippers I used all five years, toilet paper, a couple of packs of cigarettes, a dozen of melted bonbons, slightly fused plastic cup, faded jumpsuit... Wait, I decided to keep the jumpsuit as a token. Then I decided against it. I packed the bag but couldn't make myself throw the jumpsuit to the garbage. In the prison, the jumpsuit had been the whole

treasure, but it was useless on the outside... In the end, I left it next to the garbage bin right in the bag, maybe some hobo would take them. The jumpsuit was pretty good in general...

In the chest pocket of the KGB, I saw a train ticket. It was clear that he waited to put me on the train. I tried to talk him into giving me the ticket. I said, 'I can go on my own; I won't get into trouble' and so on. He didn't give it. That was the order, of course...

The train arrived. They saw me off all the way to the train car. The KGB produced the ticket. I walked into the car, looked around. I had two huge checkered bags. I looked like a strange mix of an orphan and a suitcase trader. I was trying to get myself together...

Then I called my family using the phone of the fellow passengers – strange, but very nice people – a woman and her mother-in-law returning from Kobrin. After they learned that I had just left the prison, they started to fix me tea, feed me bananas and Snickers. I talked with them the whole trip and 2.5 hours just flew. I got off the train. There was already a rat in civilian clothes with video-camera, you bet... From the pass about a dozen people were almost flying towards me: some were running, some were on bikes. I threw the bags down and hugged everyone, one by one. Gosh,

how you all have changed... And it may very well be that I have changed a lot too. It took me some time to recognize some of them. And people kept coming. All who were a part of my past life, whom I hadn't seen for five years. They didn't forget me. They came rushing up the minute they found out that I had been released. I didn't expect to see many of them, for example, Olga Nikolaychik and Dima Dashkevich. And journalists were there too. They asked questions and I shot back some typical anti-regime flub-dubs. But I was on the verge of killing them for one question: 'What are your plans?' What plans, guys? I had just got out of a cement box 2 by 2 metres in size, my world narrowed to a point. I didn't realize yet where I was. My brain, soul, and senses were still in cell 19. My plans were to clean up the cell in the morning, do some yoga and check out 'Jack London' in the library. What the hell were you asking about?!

It happened that none of my family were at home at the time I was released but before midnight we met. That night I couldn't fall asleep. My body was in a very strange condition. I roamed the apartment and without thinking I was doing some things that I hadn't been doing for years: opened the fridge, surfed the Internet, washed with hot water. My hands remembered how to do all that but my mind didn't. It took me four days

to realize that I wasn't living in prison anymore. Before that, if they returned me there I wouldn't have felt anything at all: that short-term release would have been forgotten as a regular walk in the yard of the prison. But if you looked closely, there was a deep philosophical meaning in that. As all that happened to me was that I just transferred from one prison to another.

Only the regimes were different.

AFTERWORD

Do I regret what's happened? Today, when the time has passed, I can answer the question definitely - I don't. I don't regret anything. And if the clock could be turned back, then, at my first interrogations where my fate was determined, I would do the same thing.

I owe a lot to prison. For those who set oneself a goal of self-improvement, prison is a real school of struggle with your weaknesses, a school of understanding human psychology, a school of identifying the limits of your possibilities, in other words, the school of life. This is what it became for me. Moreover, frankly speaking, staying in prison and suffering is not difficult, if you know why and what for you are doing time. You are not doing it to bring to power another president and then complain that he let down his people, not to make the state replace a pro-Russian bureaucracy with a pro-Western one, not to have the workers of Belarusian enterprises change a state boss to a private one, and not to make the paperwork in the punitive institutions of KGB and Ministry of Interior in Belarusian instead of Russian¹. You are

¹ This is a reference to the oppositional freedom-fighters who were put in prison after the elections in 2010.

doing it to make your own, though pitifully small, contribution to the building of a society where one human being will never deprive another of freedom, rights and human dignity.

The anarchist order seems utopian to many; where the very premises of structural inequality, narrow-mindedness, hierarchy and exploitation of human by human will cease to exist and will make way for the equality of the many, tolerance, real direct democracy and liberation from any oppression. State propagandists specifically are fervently trying to prove the 'utopian nature' of anarchism. But as for me, only such a goal as the striving for this ideal can become a worthy reason for risking your freedom, health and even life in a single bet. All other goals apart from the above-mentioned are tinkering at the margins that lead to facelifting of the System which will continue to produce prisoners and guards, exploiters and the exploited, masters and slaves. The essence remains, and only the facade is changing.

It's not difficult to stay in prison for the idea if we remember the fighters of the past. Narodniks² in tsarist Russia were literally

2 A politically conscious movement of the Russian middle class in the 1860s and 1870s, some of whom became involved in revolutionary agitation against tsarism.

buried alive in lifeless dungeons - they used to spend decades there, and not many were released alive.

During the civil war, the White Guardists³ used to fry captured Makhnovist anarchists on metal sheets.

In 1906 a 20-year old social-revolutionary Maria Spiridonova who shot at a suppressor of peasants' uprisings was beaten and raped during her arrest and then sentenced to lifelong hard labour in exile. In 1941 Romanian anarchists called Haiducks of Kotovsky, who rose up to defend Jewish neighbourhoods from pogroms, were killed in a slaughter house by the legionaries who hung them on the hooks for dead animals. The memory of those who survived much more severe ordeals didn't let me lose heart and bate demands to myself. This is another reason why you shouldn't think that you are the only martyr for social justice in the world and overestimate your role in this war.

In one of the works of Carlos Castaneda, Don Juan tells his student, 'The main obstacle on the way of a warrior is considering yourself the centre of the Universe'. Indeed, the

3 Tsarist army in Russia fighting against the October Revolution.

consciousness deceives us, making us in certain moments feel just our own pain and consider just our own difficulties. Inherent egotism forces us to consider ourselves unique, a person who deserves great compassion, whose acts are uppermost and ordeals are the hardest. But this is not true. You are just a link in a chain of thousands and millions who were suffering before; they also had families, friends, they also wanted to take the air of freedom and spend time with friends instead of staying in humid dungeons. Your pain is no greater than theirs. It inspires, because it makes you - with no exaggeration - an accessory to history, and makes you more critical and demanding to yourself. You begin to understand that you are just a brick on the scale of the planet, a brick that must be used as part of history to build the new world...

We know who we are. And we know what we want. Let the people in power make up new methods of fighting with 'extremism' and think about more things to ban, let the chekists⁴ graft the budget buying new equipment for controlling us, let the cops intimidate us with their water

4 Originally an agent of Cheka, the first Soviet security organisation. Here refers to the KGB agents operating in Belarus.

canons, tear-gas grenades, and special units, let them demonise us from the screens of zombie-boxes - we will still go forward holding hands with those who have taken this path before us.

For only this means life, and meaning, and the truth.



Mikola Dziadok is an activist of Belarusian anarchist movement. He was detained on September 3, 2010 and arrested on suspicion of the attack on the Russian Embassy in Minsk with Molotov Cocktails. During the investigation the charges were changed to the organisation of an illegal protest and symbolic direct actions against the state buildings, including the destruction of property. He did not admit his guilt.

In November 2011 international human right organisations recognised Mikola a political prisoner. During his 5-year imprisonment he was transferred to several correctional facilities. He was released on August 22, 2015 by a Presidential decree of pardon. At the moment Mikola is a student of European Humanities University (Vilnius), studying World politics and Economy, and a journalist of Belarusian social-political newspaper *Novy Chas*.

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