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(Spent 5.5 years in prison)

A day in Markha

You wake up to the sound of that vile Mikhalkovian hymn – "An unbreakable union of free republics…". [The first lines of the Soviet national anthem, to which new lyrics were later co-written by Sergey Mikhalkov for a new Russian national anthem.—Trans.] 6 in the morning. You can still manage to get five more minutes of sleep before the overseers get to our corridor.

I sit in a solitary cell in a general-regime camp in the settlement of Bolshaya Markha in Yakutia. It is the '80s. A camp for common criminals, around a thousand prisoners. So that I wouldn't write their supervisory appeals for them and wouldn't go tuning them to an anti-Soviet key, the authorities have isolated me from everybody in solitary in the internal camp jail – the PKT (cell-type premises). There I spent the greater part of the term meted out to me by the court; not a very big one this time – three and a half years. Solitary confinement without a prosecutor's office order is against the law, but it suits me fine. I don't have any problems with the common criminals, but to sit together with one and the same bunch of people for months and years can get tedious.

I make a mental note to myself: "I'm going to have to not forget to complain again at the morning inspection that being held in solitary is illegal". The authorities love it when the zeks complain. If a zek is complaining, that means the authorities are doing everything right!

Now the overseers have finally gotten to my cell. Time to get up, carry my bedding to the commissary, and fasten the plank bed up against the wall. The day has begun.

The day always begins with cold. If you can see your breath, that means it's no more than 14 degrees in the cell. You could, of course, raise hell, call the authorities, and demand that they measure the temperature, but this is all useless. They'll bring a thermometer that always says +18. You could drop it in the snow, you could roast it with a match – always eighteen! What a well-trained thermometer.

And so you fight the cold with the means you have at your disposal. Fight fire with fire. You strip to the buff and pour icy water from the tap all over yourself. Then you rub yourself dry with a towel. It becomes hot and life seems wonderful. If you've got brick tea, you can boil yourself a mug of water on a piece of newspaper in the corner of the cell and enjoy a solitary chifir [ultra-strong tea, consumed almost as a recreational drug by prisoners—Trans.], sitting on your haunches and leaning against the barely warm hot-water heating pipe.

Here they bring you your morning food ration – 150 grams of gray bread. They'll bring the same kind of rations again during the day and in the evening. The balandeur ["balanda" is slang for thin, tasteless gruel, a staple of the prison diet—Trans.] is rattling the bowls as he dispenses "breakfast". He slops the allotted scoop of liquid porridge into the shlenka and places it on the little shelf in the feeding slot – eat, brother, there aren't going to be any second helpings. You swallow this tasteless chaff – or barley on a lucky day – and you feel good: life goes on. You never feel full anyway, you've already forgotten what that is, but that just makes you prize every little crumb all the more.

You can't eat your ration all at once, you need to do it little by little, soothing your belly and prolonging the pleasure. You've got to eat it on a neatly spread out handkerchief, so that you can later consign all the crumbs to your mouth.

There's an inspection at 8 in the morning. The old and the new shifts, warrants and officers do the rounds of the cells. I don't like it when they tromp around all over my crib, and as

soon as they come close, I start coughing hoarsely. They know that I've got consumption and they're afraid of catching tuberculosis, so they prefer not to open the door, and communicate with me through the feeding slot. They ask if I've got any complaints. "Yes", I answer with the stock phrase, "being held in solitary is illegal". "We will pass this on to the prosecutor", they laugh and contentedly move on. That's how it is day in and day out, year after year, and they can't even guess how much it suits me.

After the inspection – the exercise walk. Half an hour in the little exercise yard on the roof of the PKT. Usually I end up in one and the same little yard, and if you pull a knot out of one of the boards that the walls are made of, you can see part of the zone, the perimeter all in barbed wire, and even a scraggly little tree on a hummock beyond the camp fence. It is magnificent – succulently green in the summer, covered with a snow-white cloak in the winter, and even in the fall, when the branches are bare and restless, this little tree, glimpsed through the hole in the fence, is a reminder that there is a world out there that is not under the control of the prison authorities.

The days fly quickly in prison, but the years go by slowly. I arrange my days in such a way that there won't be any free time. Every day I've got my stroll – in the cell, from wall to wall, 11 kilometers per day. Six kilometers before lunch, and five after. If I'm in the PKT and not in the ShIZO [penalty isolator—Trans.], then I've got chess. I solve chess problems or play with neighbors, shouting from cell to cell. I've got an English language textbook and a collection of exercises – I'm learning the language. Once every two months I'm allowed a letter home and I write it every day, but just a little bit at a time, so that its weight won't exceed 50 grams by the time it is sent. I get letters from home and from friends. Sometimes the censor even lets through letters from people I don't know. Correspondence is a very important thing – the only connection with the outside world.

Because of the constant hunger and cold, you want to sleep all the time. Especially after lunch – an empty bowl, but hot balanda with a hint of some kind of milled grain. I sit down at the table and lower my head on top of my arms. Sometimes the overseers appraise this as sleeping during the day and I get another 15 days in the ShIZO.

From time to time, the common criminals warm me up out of their collective cash pool. I'd already quit smoking back during my first term in the PKT, and the only thing that interests me now is food; well, maybe tea as well. After the evening inspection, you can make yourself another chifir, and if you're really lucky, you can even have company to enjoy it with. When they've gotten drunk, some of the overseers become kind-hearted, and if someone in one of the neighboring cells manages to talk or bribe them into it, they let me out for an hour or two to visit the common criminals in their cell. We drink chifir together, they treat me, and we talk about life, about politics, about women, about history – about everything on earth.

Lights-out is at 10 in the evening. The plank beds are brought down, you take your mattress with the blanket and pillow from the commissary, and you dive into sleep, which is far more varied and interesting than prison life.

This is what an ordinary day is like. A zek's fate is unpredictable. One day you can become happy, having received a visitation with kin or a cheery little message from home, having strolled to the medical unit and seen the sky above your head, or having shared a food parcel you had been sent with somebody. But another day, you can feel the breath of death at the tip of a knife pressed against you, fall under the truncheons of the spetsnaz [special forces troops—Trans.] or find yourself on the brink of death in the prison hospital when, after examining you, the prison doctor shrugs his shoulders helplessly and mutters: "Hopeless".

And nobody knows what kind of a day tomorrow will be. But today has passed, and thank God for that.