

Alexei Kozlov

(Spent 4.5 years in prison)

One day

The days in prison are all the same - every day is like the previous one, like two drops of water. Only the picture around you changes, but the substance remains the same. That is why, if you're going to be describing any day at all, you could describe its substance and this would be the leitmotif for the whole of your imprisonment.

I would formulate this internal substance in brief with a single word – overcoming. You've got to overcome one and the same thing each and every day: having to interact with people you find unpleasant – there are very few of any other kind there – the noise of loud and disgusting music, food that is only suitable for feeding to pigs, unskilled and hardly pleasant work. And there's a lot more besides this that you need to overcome. You find yourself in an enclosed space and you've somehow got to find the strength within yourself to be maximally tolerant toward it so as not to waste your nerves for no purpose. I learned to simply not notice, to not hear the things that irritated me. I just occupied my thoughts with some kind of calculations, plans that had nothing to do with the unpleasant moments. I planned out every day for myself precisely, down to the minute. Even though there was no work-related or personal need for this – you're never in any hurry here. However, for me the plan was a kind of little key to another world. Even if part of this plan was devoted to such things as general lineup and other prison events, internally for yourself this was already a part of your own plan, and not coercion from the outside. Naturally, fulfilling each and every point of the plan would arouse positive emotions in any case. And so I was somehow able to create a micro-world. With the music and the social interaction, of course, it was more complicated - it was more complicated to separate oneself from this. I tried to find some

positive points in social interaction. As an example, I would inquire in detail about the locale that my conversation partner was from, about the customs and traditions there. A lot of information was accumulated over this time, and about the entire space of the former USSR at that, for a prison is international. It was interesting to chat with nationalists about who is paying for their actions and how; I learned a lot of new things. I picked the brains of different guys whose “roofs” [patronage and protection from highly-placed people—Trans.] were various representatives of the siloviki structures [broadly speaking, enforcement agencies, including the FSB—Trans.], about the conditions of their work with the siloviki. I found out many new things about the different subjects of the Federation [provinces (oblasts) and ethnic “autonomies”—Trans.]. Even before Cherkizon [the Cherkizovsky market in Moscow—Trans.] was shut down, I knew about many of its shady sides in detail. In general, with each conversation partner I picked out specific questions that would broaden my knowledge. With music it was more complicated, people like cheap pop music and all that kind of stuff, that was why the contingent genuinely did want to listen to it 24 hours a day. Here I had to resort to cunning. I would immediately figure out who the football and other sports fans were, and unite them together behind the idea of being up to date on current sporting events, without having to wait a week until the press arrived, but getting the information in real time. Therefore, in the evenings, we would several times make arrangements with the others to switch the radio to the news, which included sports news as well. But of course, first and foremost I listened to other news about which nothing was being said on TV. So I had to endure the pop music knowing that in the evening I would be able to listen to normal news, and this wasn't torture, but a deal that had been reached. And a deal is something you perceive entirely differently; you stop perceiving the music as an irritant. And so it went, day in and day out.