

Sergei Kovalev

(Spent 7 years in prison and 3 years in exile)

ONE DAY

The night before, before lights out, as always, we were drinking tea with hard candies.

Dmitro MalYi (he was playing hostess grudgingly and imperceptibly as it were) was pouring out several more sooshki [small rings of hard-baked dough—Trans.] – why be thrifty, shopping day is coming soon, they “won’t deny the shop” to several of us at once [prisoners can buy a limited amount of additional food in the camp shop only once a month; this privilege can be taken away as punishment—Trans.]. One, well, two even – no matter, we’ll survive, that’s why we’re together. (The old guys call this a “little family”, but this word never did catch on with us).

The intrigue here was in the fact that us two detachments lived in one barrack. This means everyone’s got to drink tea in his half.

Well chief, I’m completely at your cop-will, but still it’s not you who are going to be telling me who I should smoke with, who I should have a cuppa with.

We desperately defended this freedom of choice. You’re going to deprive me of shop privileges, drag me to the BUR [intensified regime block—Trans.]? Like I’ve never been in the BUR before! That’s why the demand: “go to your detachment!” usually went in one ear and out the other, because we simply didn’t want to hear it. I’m not going to start asserting that it was as if the resistance always to the bitter end, nor am I going to get into the important little details that determined the “strategy of the sides”, the maneuvers and demarches in such conflicts. Naturally, when the dust settled, you’d have to do time. But for the authorities too it wasn’t always in a position to react with full force, all barrels blazing. But that is really an entirely separate story.

That time, the cops, passing by, were looking on knowingly, with a sneer, but they were keeping quiet. This means there hadn't been an order to write up reports – a pleasant campaign, a free discussion.

I don't remember any more how it was that the conversation turned to the anecdotal incident involving I.P., who had come into the zone about a year ago. We would recall this incident often, incidentally.

So it happened that one evening a person I was not yet acquainted with came up to me, introduced himself, and very stubbornly strove to find out “whether I'm that Kovalev”. The question put me in a difficult situation, but my interlocutor, without being able to recall a single remotely concrete feature of “that” Kovalev, handled the awkward moment. He gave a wave of his hand, saying it's clear that you're that one, who else could you be. And reported, more with a sad dignity than with a complaint:

“I'm inside for you, after all!”

“But how could this be?”, I asked, alarmed.

“Well, I was passing on the details of your trial in Moscow beyond the border, after all!

Well, not just yours alone, others' too!”

“Excuse me, but I was tried in Vilnius, after all!”

“That can't be, ...You ...must be mistaken ...”

“Well, I really doubt that!”

I don't remember how we got out of the inextricable predicament. But this is what did become clear: I.P. had drawn up a report on Soviet political trials and had palmed off his neat notebook on a soused Finn – one of those who, personifying the “Finlandization of Europe”, travelled to Leningrad for vodka. It's hard to say in what dialect the conspirators

were explaining themselves to one another. I. was convinced that his labor would be immediately in demand by some decent radio station broadcasting at the USSR – the BBC, say, or Voice of America. It goes without saying that the notebook ended up at the KGB. I can just see the frightened juice-head rushing to get himself to the nearest customs officer.

“Just where would you have been getting information about the trials?”, I asked.

‘What do you mean, where? I was listening to radio from abroad and taking notes!’

Poor I.! He was hoping to give the radio programs their own stories! Incidentally, at times he was also pasting broadside on city walls. Having read a bit of what he’d written in the zone, I am convinced that the vividly individual stylistics of his *dàzìbào* [big-character posters put up by ordinary citizens during the Cultural Revolution in China—Trans.] did not pose any difficulty for identification.

As always, this story, which caused bewilderment, entailed a half-hearted discussion. To suspect operative’s games [i.e. that this was a setup by the authorities—Trans.] was impossible: I.P. was doing time austerely, he stubbornly battled with the cops; his thespian talents, let’s be blunt here, are pretty much close to zero; and finally, what could this record-breakingly absurd legend possibly give him?

The guys were chuckling, whirling their fingers by the sides of their foreheads, and weren’t looking for more complicated versions of the story. But as for me, I kept seeing the sketch of a dual portrait – of the country and its citizen I.P. – whirling around in my head. A very strange couple. Well, why, it would seem, would citizen I.P. be reproaching Soviet power so bitterly? Okay, let’s say he had some kind of domestic troubles, but they didn’t come from the pinnacle of power, after all, did they? Yet here he is exacting justice. Yes, he’s no high specialist in legal proceedings, but attorneys at law aren’t law professors either, after all. It

still seems to me that contained in his simple critique, no matter how you say it, was a moral impulse. What was driving him? Ambition? Laughable!

Well, and the country? What can you say about a country that looks for such enemies for itself and punishes an awkward attempt with 5 years of strict regime?

Yevhen Sverstiuk was mysteriously silent. He was thinking of something of his own. It seemed to me that he did not consider my guess empty at all.

And at this point lights-out was announced.

The next day, in the industrial zone, before lunch still: “Kovalev, with things!” What “things” can you have with you in the industrial zone? I grabbed a second pair of mittens, a filthy towel, a sleeveless shirt someone had given me. In the residential zone they led me into the commissary – pick out what’s yours. This means a stage. Interesting, where? And what to do about this pile of books and zek odds and ends that attach themselves to you over the years. It’s not that I can’t carry it all with me – I can’t even lift it. Well, the books can go to the library. I’m sitting in the big room at headquarters, right next to duty room of the DPNK [duty assistant of the chief of the colony—Trans.] and the detail. A warrant officer peers in.

“Chief, where am I off to?”

“Sit here.”

A tired youngish woman in a stern-looking suit comes in.

“All rise, the trial is in session.”

So that’s what this is. Well, there’s nobody to rise besides me. I rise. Another four come in, one in uniform – the prosecutor. Behind him, all the zone’s officers and warrant officers. These are both the witnesses and the spectators. Not a single zek. Everybody sits down in

one hall; there isn't a separate room for the witnesses [as there is in a normal Russian court, to keep the witnesses from hearing any of the trial beforehand.—Trans.]. Nor is there a defense.

A case on changing the detention regime is heard.

While you're in a ShIZO or in a PKT, your regime remains the same – strict. But there are still two more “higher” regimes – special and jail. By law the harshest is jail. In just what way it's worse than special is something, I think, that can't be understood. From strict regime, in the order of stiffening of the punishment, one can end up only at the very highest one – in jail. But as for the intermediate one, according to their idiotic table – special “spetz”, “striped” (that's another name they had for it) – they didn't take you there; you only got there through a criminal court.

So my trial, at the end of December 1980, was an extramural session of the Chusov people's court in an administrative case – that's what I understood then, although this was profoundly uninteresting to me. It is possible, by the way, that something has now changed in this section of our advanced jurisprudence.

To be honest, there's nothing to remember about the trial. The prosecution's logic was held together by the axiom of malicious intent.

If I didn't fulfill the output norm, this signified conscious causing of harm to production. “If the norm was fulfilled, why was it always by 103 %; if he can give 103, then why not all 105? He is not aspiring to expiate guilt, but is earning an additional 2 roubles for the shop”, “has many penalties”, “enters into lengthy conversations with new arrivals, but he's not a political worker, after all”. There is nothing else to remember, nor is it really necessary.

But suddenly an unexpected episode occurred – the judge asked the witnesses and prosecutor a question. “How is it that it turns out that the accused Kovalev has nothing but

negative personality attributes – such a thing can't be. There is something good in every person". A bewildered pause ensued. What's going on, what did we come here for? The pause dragged on, but the judge stood his ground. And here my detachment chief, senior lieutenant Belov, nicknamed "Profursetka", stood up and said: "Yes, there was such an incident once – Kovalev stayed around to unload a car of coal after the shift. But he did this not in order to help production, but in order to earn time off". And on that they ended – they imposed jail regime right on up until the end of the term – a year with 3 – 4 days. They took me together with all my gathered things straight to the BUR already, to the quarantine cell. There was nobody sitting in the ShIZO and the PKT at that time. And suddenly I hear the cops asking somebody something, and that somebody is obviously a zek – that means they've brought in a new one. I tried to communicate through the sewer pipe, but either the cesspit was full or my new comrade didn't know about this method. We did manage to communicate nevertheless. They led me out to the little exercise yard, and the new arrival's window happened to look out into it. The little ventilation window opened, and I recognized Vitya Nekipelov. The duty room window also looked out on the exercise yard, but it was winter and the cops didn't want to open the ventilation window – they were looking out at the yard through a double frame. That's why our conversation took place like this: Vitya, through the open ventilation window, spoke in a quiet voice to my face. I answered him on my return path, with my back to his window.

Two days passed and they took me on a stage to Chistopol, where the political department of the roofed jail had moved from Vladimir.

The year was 1980, the Olympiad.