

Valeria Novodvorskaya

(Spent almost 4 years in prison)

One Day in the Life of Valeriya Ilyinichna

Morning in Lefortovo starts late. The glass panes are thick and grainy, the light of the sun can't be seen through them, and so daybreak arrives much later than on the street.

If this is the second floor and the left side, then that means that something green is going to be looming through this thick grainy glass during the day – a part of Lefortovo's little garden.

Morning starts at 6 o'clock. That is how it started for me in '69, and in '70, and in '86, and in '91 (until August).

If there's a very bright light bulb hanging from the ceiling, this means it's '69 or '70. Later on a pale-violet nightlight appeared.

At 6 o'clock they start rattling the feeding slots and saying: "Reveille!" In the process, they give out to me the eyeglasses that they take at lights-out. Well, and then the labor morning starts. You need to manage to wash yourself while nobody is looking in the peephole. Then comes service time: the duty officer taps with a large knife and offers to cut the sausage and cheese from the parcel [received from relatives on the outside.—Trans.].

If this is '91, this means that expanded service is going to be offered in the morning: they're going to come and offer to repair your shoes on the house courtesy of the Lefortovo jail, to send your dress and little suit to the dry cleaner's, and to wash your clothes for you. They do a good job washing, and they do it for free and quickly. The shoe repair is also wonderful.

In '70 they changed the linens once every 10 days; if this is '86 and '91, that means they'll change them once a week.

Breakfast is in about an hour or so. The traditional prison breakfast: always the same little pile of granulated sugar that Ivan Denisovich had, millet porridge, and bread that you can find only in Lefortovo. Apparently they bake this bread especially for prisons; such a thing doesn't exist in Moscow – absolutely inedible, even when it's fresh. But you get a lot. 600 grams [1.3 pounds—Trans.] By the way, nobody wants to eat the bread; everybody wants to eat, but they want something tastier. That's why the old zeks, even the ones who were sitting in Lefortovo way back during the “doctors' plot” [1952–53—Trans.], call Lefortovo the “tourhotel”.

After the hydrotherapy procedures it's time to tidy up the cell. I usually sing the songs of Okudzhava or Vysotsky, or of Galich. You've got to sweep the little cell and wipe the dust off of a few things. The furnishings are completely spartan: a stool, two or three iron cots, and little shelves for provisions. If this is '86 and '91, that means it's a solitary cell. As the commandant of the given establishment says – a one-room apartment with all the modern conveniences. It's a good thing that at least they don't charge rent. If this is '69 or '70, that means there will be cellmates. One or two. There were always few women in Lefortovo – this is a political prison, but at that time they were putting currency traders and big bribe-takers there too. What lovely company.

Then to work. As that same commandant rightfully says: we're not renting an apartment to do-nothing loafers; if you've gotten an apartment, you've got to work – that is, go to interrogations. Into the investigative block. If this is '86 and '91, the investigators are going to be pure honey. They're going to be courteous and kind, and they'll be writing the answers down themselves without even asking you any questions.

I refuse to answer out of moral and ethical considerations.

Very entertaining – I'll be able to discuss the latest political news, all the more so because they give Izvestiia and Pravda into the cell in the morning.

If this is '91, that means you can already get any newspaper. At your own expense, of course. And there are going to be any books at all from home lying on the little table (also a part of the furnishings), that is both Galich and Solzhenitsyn. Did they ever imagine that there would come a time when it would be permitted to read them in a political prison?!

Later on the librarian will come by and offer something from the sumptuous Lefortovo library; by the way, I'd already read every book in it during my first stint, in '69 and '70.

The exercise walk usually takes place in the second half of the day. At first the little yards were downstairs, then they were on the roof (you've got to ride the elevator), and one time in my three stints I discovered a ladybug. This was absolutely splendid. Sometime around '70, in the little yard – quite bare, cement, covered with netting above – a ladybug came down to me. We spent a long time socializing with one another. And in '91 I was visited by a butterfly who had inexplicably managed to get inside.

After the exercise period there is free time. If it's not Friday. Friday is shower day. The shower is luxurious, tiled, with individual stalls, and they'll give you cuticle scissors. That is, more than enough entertainment. There are books, there are dictionaries, there are schoolbooks. If this is '91, that means a slogan from Nabokov written in my own hand is hanging on the sheet with the rules of internal order: "A prisoner's meekness is a prison's pride" and "The administration is not responsible for the disappearance of items, including the prisoner himself".

Then there is going to be a procedure like this for lunch. The soup at Lefortovo is decent, you can even find pieces of fat floating in it occasionally, the shchi [cabbage soup—Trans.] is perfectly edible, and the pea soup isn't bad either. But the second course never changes –

some kind of porridge. But then for supper they sometimes have such a delicacy as canned herring. Once every four days. And vinegret [a salad made of cubed cooked beets and other vegetables, often served with herring—Trans.], which I don't eat anyway.

If this is '86 and '91, that means they'll leave the crucifix; nobody is going to try to take it down or take it away.

Evening in Lefortovo comes rather quickly. Because with glass like that it gets darker earlier than on the outside.

Lefortovo is an aristocratic prison, a kind of Bastille for the crème-de-la-crème of the anti-Soviet world. All the more so given that in '86 they were already pretty much not locking up currency traders at all in principle, there were no more of them, and this was all the more true in '91. And its only shortcoming is the bariatric chamber system. Such a deep-water silence and absolutely no sounds. You can't run a television into there – the walls are such that it simply won't catch any signal (the walls in this prison, which dates back to the times of Catherine [the Great, reigned 1762–1796—Trans.], are 1.5 meters thick). You absolutely can't run a radio into here for the same reason. And a person with weak nerves there is probably going to start screaming and banging his head against that same wall. Because such silence is good for those who are training to become cosmonauts. But for those who aren't training to be a cosmonaut, it becomes very unpleasant.

All in all, Lefortovo is a good place to learn languages, a good place to do translations. If not for the August revolution, I would have finished learning German and would have had the time to learn Italian. And <in Lefortovo> there's as much space as you want. Only the first floor and half of the second are occupied; the third and the fourth are perpetually vacant. I don't know what's happening there now; my recollections end on 23 August 1991, but back then it was very roomy there. And the commandant bragged how look, there's no butter in

the city, and they're giving out only half a kilo of cheese in hand per person, but he's got as much cheese and butter as you want in the prison shop. If Muscovites found out where you could procure cheese and butter, they would instantly go get locked up in his jail.

Unfortunately, Lefortovo is only a whistle stop, the pier from which ships set off for the Archipelago and not all of them with a round-trip ticket. So it can be said that of all the islands, peninsulas, and islets of the Archipelago, Lefortovo was the most comfortable. If, of course, we forget about the Stalinist times, about which we are actively reminded by the books from the library, which were confiscated from prisoners who were subsequently executed and which still bear the personal seals of their original owners. And on each book there is a neat little stamp. On the first and on the seventeenth page – “NKVD internal prison” (because all of the books came from the “internie” on Lubyanka, which was shut down in '60 and the entire library moved to Lefortovo).

The day ends at 10 o'clock. It's lights out at 10 o'clock; the night light is turned on and eyeglasses are taken away, so you can't read any more, but you can have sweet dreams about freedom.