



Ignaty Vasilevich Arendarenko
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Retrieved on 4th September 2020 from
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Translator's Note: Arendarenko's article was serialized in *Delo Truda-Probuzhdenie*: No28 (Jan.-Feb. 1949), pp. 10–11; No29 (May-June 1949), pp. 15–16; No30 (Aug.-Sep. 1949), pp. 18–20; No31 (Dec. 1949), pp. 13–15. Thanks for biographical information are due to A. Dubovik and his "Calendar" in the forum at makhno.ru. Thanks also to the Museum of Political Exiles in Narym for period photos.

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What I Saw and Experienced

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In 1937–1938 the last anarchists in the USSR were physically eliminated by Stalin's terror. One exception was the Ukrainian anarchist Ignaty Vasilevich Arendarenko (1898–after 1953). A native of Poltava, he joined the anarchist movement in 1919, taking part in the Poltava branch of the Nabat Anarchist Confederation and the Makhnovist movement. From 1926 to 1936 Arendarenko was either in prison or serving terms of exile. Possessed of excellent survival skills, when he had the opportunity in 1936 he began to live illegally, spending the next few years in Ukraine. Dodging first Stalin's agents, then the Nazis, he was finally swept up in a raid in 1944 and sent to Austria as a "guest" worker. After the war he lived in Western Europe, contributing articles to the Russian-American journal *Dielo Truda-Probuzhdenie* (DTP). In 1952 he emigrated to Mexico.

In the following article written for DTP, Arendarenko honours the memory of the fellow anarchists (and others) he met in the Soviet justice system.

As soon as I was able to correspond with you, I had the intention of writing about our comrades with whom I lived, or encountered or saw, or about whom I heard from others during my passage through “the institution of moral and physical torture upon which rests the Stalinist throne.” Although a lot of time has passed since those days, I still see clearly in my mind’s eye the images of my comrades, sharply impressed on my memory under conditions which could be termed a terrifying nightmare. I frankly acknowledge that the things that I saw or experienced myself, or heard about from others, could not be the result of even the most morbid imagination. For the main thing is, it was not just an individual personality who was subjected to these tortures, but tens of thousands in Solovki, and millions in the multiple concentration camps of the USSR. It’s still hard for me to believe that this was reality, and not a terrible dream.

I will not dwell on a description of my life as an illegal activist, my arrest, detention in the internal prisons of the GPU-NKVD, interrogations, etc., for these events concern only myself. Not that they are without interest, for they demonstrate how the system works and the methods of the Bolshevik machine of terror. Rather I shall move on to the “island of torments and death” as we called Solovki in 1926–1928, and list those comrades with whom I had brief encounters. According to the “constitution” of the Solovki concentration camp, it was forbidden to socialize with those living in other sketes [hermitages]. But if you were on an assignment, it might be permitted to meet other prisoners, but such meetings were conducted with great formality, just like a prison visit.

I arrived at the famous Solovetsky Kremlin, i.e. at the former monastery, which at that time was the head-quarters of the both Solovki camps and the mainland concentration camps of Karelia and Leningradskaya oblast. Before being sent into the interior of the island for logging work, I had a chance to spend a few minutes with Comrade Gromov (from Moscow) and his crew. He was in a hurry to get to his job—he worked in the administration of

them down. However, I did find out that Liuba Kitskaya was in exile somewhere in Central Asia with Anatoly Konse.⁷ Kiryusha Dotsenko was also somewhere in the “GPU meat-grinder.” The last time I met Driker was in 1922 in Kiev and don’t know what happened to him.⁸ In 1924 I met Olga Taratuta⁹ in Sviatoshino, near Kiev. She was living there in an illegal situation.

I. V. A.

⁷ The individualist anarchist Anatoly Josifovich Konse (1899–after 1936), born in Kiev, was a well known poet whose compositions were published in the Russian anarchist press (in France and the USA) in the 1920s. This led to his arrest in 1929 and terms of exile. In 1934 he was arrested in Voronezh, along with Aron Baron, his friend since 1917.

⁸ Nuhim Veniaminovich Driker (1889 – after 1929), an anarcho-communist from 1909, was an active member of the Nabat Confederation of Anarchists of Ukraine. Like many Ukrainian anarchists, he was arrested on November 25 1920. Released in 1921 or 1922, he published memoirs on the history of the anarchist movement and was active in the All-Union Society of Former Political Prisoners and Exiles. His subsequent fate is unknown.

⁹ Olga Ilinichna Taratuta (1876–1938) was one of the most famous Russian anarchists of the early 20th century. In the 1920s and 1930s she took part in underground activities in Kiev, Odessa, and Moscow. Arrested nine times under both tsarist and Soviet regimes, she served 17 years in prison.

the island’s woodland resources. He gave the impression of being cheerful and energetic.

In early 1928 I visited the Savvatevsky skete (7–8 km from my “Beloye” skete), where I met Comrade Kardau (a Georgian), who apparently had spent 10 years in concentration camps. He was a “hero” among the Solovkians for enduring a 22-day hunger strike. They tried to feed him artificially, with the help of enemas, of course against his wishes. He walked with crutches, but I don’t remember which foot he was dragging. Although he was terribly agitated, his agitation was not that of an irritated person, but rather a rebel. His body language, not just his stare and the sharp tone of his voice, bespoke his confidence in himself, his devotion to an idea, and his indomitable will. He showed me the common grave of the political prisoners killed at the time of the “great upheaval” in Solovki in 1922. From him I learned that the following comrades were found in Solovki: Plotnikov, Mikhail Neikrug, Sergei Sakharov, Aleksandrov, Anya Osokina, and Sablin.

When I had reached the end of my sentence in Solovki, I was ordered to bring my things to the Administration (in the Kremlin), where I was told: “Your case has been reviewed by a special meeting of a Collegium of the OGPU which has decided to exile you for three years to the Northern Urals.” Again, the same hold of the steamer “Gleb Boky,” followed by the nauseating stuffiness of prisoner wagons in which one had to sleep sitting because of overcrowding. Then “Kresty,” Perm, Sverdlovsk. In the transport to Sverdlovsk I traveled together with Sergei Sakharov. We were separated in the Sverdlovsk prison, where he was sent to Ust-Sysolsk, while I was turned over to the Tobolsk department of the GPU.

In the Tobolsk transit prison I heard from Zionists bound for exile in the North (in Samarovo), that the anarchist Kruglov was serving a term of exile in Tobolsk. My destination was Surgut. As was the custom, the steam-boat with my transport was met at the dock by all the political exiles. Upon disembarking, I was met by the following comrades: Filipp Prianishnikov (a worker

from Mariupol), Misha Natashenko (a miner from the Donbas), Misha's wife Natasha, and Sasha Gomeni-uk (more about him below). With the next transport arrived Vanya Kruglov (from Mos-cow, just transferred from Tobolsk), Vasya Lomov (from Rostov, just transferred from Tyumen), Sergei Krasavin (from the Suzdal politisolator), Maksimov (from Petrograd, a student from the senior class of the Geographic Institute), and Mikhail Neikrug (from Solovki). We joked that anarchists had the possibility of gathering in such numbers only during the period when our organizations were legal. But, as usual, this "blissful life" didn't last very long.

In letters from Narym and other places of exile—and from Krasavin who arrived on the next transport and had heard something in the politisolator—we learned that there was something "wrong" about Gomeniuk. This was the first of the dark clouds to roll in and disrupt our "blissful existence." Upon receiving reliable information about Gomeniuk's collaboration, we in-formed all the political exiles in Surgut: four Left SRs, two Right SRs, four Mensheviks, and eight Zionists. In a short time, the GPU transferred Gomeniuk to Tobolsk. This was at the end of 1929, and in early 1930 they arrested Vanya Kruglov, accusing him of propaganda of terror, namely, that in his own apartment he had remarked that it would be a good thing if some-one killed that low-life Stalin. We didn't know whose "work" this was—Gomeniuk or local informers. Al-most all the landlords of the exiles were snitches, and if the landlord was too thickheaded to be suitable for this role, then the next door neighbour would be "saddled with the mission" by the GPU.

Since the 6 rubles 30 kopecks issued monthly to political exiles was sufficient only for tobacco, all of us anarchists worked: some on building a cannery (re-purposing a church), replenishing stocks of firewood (in winter), and haymaking (in summer). We had to register with the GPU twice a week. Each political exile had to sign an undertaking that they would not venture more than half

factory]. He lived with his wife, who did not take part in our movement.

After living in the south for nine months, I learned through acquaintances that the NKVD was interested in me. So I moved to a different place to live under deep cover. A woman friend arranged a position for me, and I soon made the adjustment, meeting all the requirements for my new job. In my new home I learned from acquaintances that some one was looking for me; all the signs suggested that this was Bagryanov, who had left Tomsk.

We were visited by some comrades on their way from Narym to Tomsk upon finishing their terms of exile: Ion, a native of Moscow and Rozhkov from the Northern Caucasus. I had met the latter back in 1926 in prison. In exile he got married and, apparently, although I can't say for sure, had left the movement. At least that's my impression after talking with him.

In Tomsk, besides the anarchists, there were also two SRs: Rodin-Chernovets and Viktor Selivanov (a Left SR). The latter had written a pamphlet entitled "The Blue Bird—a Persian Fable," a critique of the Five Year Plan of industrialization. Besides us, some others of his acquaintance knew about this pamphlet. The GPU found out about it and that was sufficient cause to arrest him and give him a new term of exile. It was said that his wife was indirectly responsible for this with her blabbing; soon after Viktor's arrest, she married a Communist Party member.

Once I was in southern Russia, I was able to track down in various villages members of the family that Lenya Zaidiner and I lived with illegally in 1926. From the father of this family, who had served a term of exile in Komi-Zyrian oblast [Komi Republic] I learned that he had run into Zaidiner, who was serving a term of exile in Ust-Sysolsk. Lenya was a native of Poltava.

In 1937 while visiting Poltava illegally, I tried to learn the fate of our comrades Boris and Liuba Nemeritskaya, Yury Khomuntovsky and his wife Natasha, and Kiryusha Dotsenko, but their relatives were no longer living in their old apartments and I couldn't track

he returned to Russia, nor do I know what name he was living under there.

Misha Vidyukov, the youngest of us (around 27 or 28) was from Kazan, a medical student. A very sympathetic person and good-natured, he was a pamphleteer, an avocation that he practiced even in exile. He wrote pieces on current events and read them to us. These writings were then destroyed or hidden, if possible. But his face already showed signs of incipient tuberculosis—the scourge that helped the organs of the NKVD hasten the disappearance of “enemies of the revolution,” while those “enemies” made the rounds of concentration camps, politisolators, and exile.

Peter Fisin, like the others, arrived in Tomsk to serve a three year “minus,” having already put in six years: three years in a politisolator and three years of exile. A native of Poltava, he had studied at Kiev University in the mathematics department. In Tomsk he worked in the planning section of a metallurgical plant. He studied the German language to improve his proficiency in that language and translated a German novel into Russian. Like all of us, he worked late and arrived home tired out. But I interacted with him almost daily, since we lived in the same house.

After I left Tomsk, I corresponded with Fisin through a woman friend until the end of 1936. This woman friend helped me get out of Tomsk and live a semi-legal existence. She acted as a “lightning rod,” diverting the strikes of the NKVD in those situations where it was necessary to cross “quagmires” where almost each step could be fatal. She told me that Fisin, at the end of his “minus,” which had been extended for some reason, asked permission from the NKVD to go to Spain to fight fascism. But some time later he was taken away in the night in a “Black Crow” [prison van]. Her efforts to find out about his subsequent fate were all in vain: he had vanished without a trace.

Mikhail Bagryanov, after his arrest, was sent directly into exile, bypassing the concentration camp and the politisolator. He served his “minus” in Tomsk as a tailor, working for Shveypprom [garment

a kilometre beyond the settlement and that crossing this “Rubicon” would be considered an escape attempt, resulting in being sent to Solovki. It’s true that we didn’t worry about this while foraging for wild fruit (bilberries, cowberries), since the GPU wasn’t able to recruit trees as collaborators.

Winter evenings were spent according to one’s personal inclinations: I studied mathematics and the Russian language with Misha Natashenko; Vasya Lomov studied higher mathematics, and Sergei Krasavin statistics; Alesha Maksimov wrote articles for the Geographical Institute about the ice ages of Siberia. In circulation were only those books which comrades had brought with themselves or had been left by our predecessors, since those who left with a “minus” could not take books with them.

In the frosty nights—and the temperature could drop to -61° Celsius in Surgut—the whole anarchist colony got together and discussed various topics, including the anarchist movement in 1917–1930, and also methods of work for the future, assuming that conditions would exist for pursuing such work. Reviewing the past stages of struggle of anarchists in Russia, almost all of us came to the conclusion that to achieve anarchist goals, it was necessary to use the method of preparing the broad masses to be receptive to our ideas, rather than the method of “guerrilla warfare.”

In the winter of 1929 the wave of “struggle with the kulaks as a class” rolled as far as Surgut. All the Party and Komsomol members were mobilized for patrol duty in the village (or town, as they called it). I don’t re-call how many families suffered from this “fate.” Why “fate”? Because at that time you couldn’t have any kind of settlement without families subject to dekulakization; if such could not be found, then they were created. They were given a day’s notice to assemble for deportation. They were driven out into the sharp cold. One woman was on the point of childbirth, and asked to stay in her home until she gave birth. But her entreaties fell on deaf ears; she was also driven out and gave birth, they say, at night in a pile of hay.

They began to organize the “fishermen’s artel” into a kolkhoz. Those who didn’t join the artel were hit with a “stiff quota” before they could sell fish from their catch in the apartment quarter. The food supply became problematic, since it was impossible to buy fish because the kolkhoz delivered its fish to the cannery, while the private fishermen who hadn’t fulfilled their quota, did not have the right to sell. And since the plan was almost never fulfilled (and was impossible to fulfill), we were stuck without fish.

Exiles weren’t allowed to work at the cannery. The anarchists, almost all of us, had contract work preparing firewood for the school and the hospital. On the first steamer from Tobolsk (no politicals on board) a GPU plenipotentiary arrived. We immediately guessed that something was afoot, that arrests would be taking place. On the evening before the arrival of the steamer, two guardsmen came to our apartment—mine and Prianishnikov’s—and announced that by order of the plenipotentiary we did not have the right to leave the apartment. I sent a kid, the son of the landlord, to the other comrades, and found out that such “guests” also visited Neikrug and Krasavin. In the morning the plenipotentiary arrived and declared that we must show up at the dock with our things at 12 noon. Only now we understood that this was a normal relocation, since almost none of the politicals served their whole sentence in one place. This was the GPU’s system at that time.

We bid emotional farewells to those comrades seeing us off, who were staying in Surgut: these included the anarchists Alesha Maksimov, V. Lomov, and the miner Misha and his wife. The rest of the political exiles were also present: from the Mensheviks Viktor Ausem and his wife, Roza Voitsekhovskiy from Alexandria in Kherson province, and Nikolai with his wife; from the Left SRs Yuri Gudvan (a student), Pavel Vershinin, Sergei Buntar (a metalworker who been in exile during the tsarist regime), and Frosa (a weaver from the former Morozov Factory); and from the Zionists Hirshem (a Kievan who had taken part in the Civil War and been awarded

nants of the pre-revolutionary cadres or comrades from the formations of the first years after 1917. This was evident even in their external appearance, as well as the fact that they could understand one another with just a few words. They lacked the nervous impulsiveness, the unbalanced behavior, and the rash judgments characteristic of young anarchists—young not just in age, but in anarchist experience. Representatives of these replacements included Kostya Orlov, Misha Vidyukov, Mikhail Bagrianov, and Peter Fisin.⁶ (I’m writing the names the way we called one another in the exile milieu.)

Kostya Orlov arrived in Tomsk to finish a “minus” and in early 1934 left for Samarskaya oblast; upon arrival there he sent us a letter. And then, until my departure from Tomsk, there was no further news from him, as often happened in such cases. This could be explained by a change to a semi-legal or even illegal situation, or another arrest. In Tomsk Orlov had worked in the planning department of a forestry enterprise. In Tomsk, as well as in other places of exile (like Naryn), his wife Tamara shared his lot. I believe she was with him in emigration in North America. I can’t recall in which city or state Orlov lived in America, but I know he ended up as a taxi driver who owned his own vehicle. When I knew him in Tomsk, he was about 45, perhaps older. Among the Tomsk anarchist exiles he was distinguished by his calm disposition, a rarity among our comrades who had been exposed to conditioning in the “forges of the GPU.” Tamara was an amazingly compassionate and sympathetic comrade, but her nerves were already frayed. Kostya never complained about his poor health, but Tamara was quite weak. I don’t remember in what year he emigrated to America, and when

⁶ Peter Artemevich Fisun (1902–1937) joined the Poltava branch of the Nabat Confederation of Anarchists of Ukraine in 1919. During the 1920s he was active in the Kharkov anarchist underground. Arrested seven times under the Soviet regime, he served four years of prison and nine years of exile. In 1936–1937 he petitioned the NKVD for permission to “go to Spain to fight fascism.” Instead, he and other anarchists serving terms of exile in Tomsk were shot.

ideology and if it was possible to “dislodge” anyone from their position.

My interrogator spoke about the “achievements” in building industry, the “enthusiasm” of the masses, and the uselessness of struggle. In order to get away from him as soon as possible, I said that I had seen the “enthusiasm of the masses” in the persons of the “special settlers” and had heard how things were going in the south, and that I had no intention of singing praises. At this point the interrogation ended. And, for some reason, the interrogator babbled something about our movement abroad, mentioning the Paris *Dielo Truda*, but he sounded like a schoolboy who hadn’t prepared his lesson; he wanted to show off his knowledge of the anarchist movement.

In prison I learned in detail from prisoners arriving from the south about the nightmarish horrors that had cost millions of lives in Ukraine, the Kuban, and Crimea, and which they called an “artificial famine.” The sidewalks of the cities were strewn with corpses in the mornings. Passersby stepped over them with the sinking feeling that it was just like war: today it’s your turn, tomorrow it’s mine. They told harrowing stories of cannibalism in the villages and cities in the grip of starvation.

Opposition Bolsheviks began arriving on the prisoner transports from “freedom.” The supply of representatives of other parties had already run dry, but now the repressive system was in high gear again, crushing new victims. I was sent back to Tomsk to finish my term of exile, and then got a new three year term to serve in various cities of Turkestan.

In Tomsk I met new comrades. During my spell in prison, the “vigilant guard of the revolution” had tried to fill vacant places with others, sent to “replace” us. In contrast to the preceding cohort, caught up in another cycle of exile terms handed out by the GPU, the “replacements” were not distinguished by a mixture of temperaments and ages—they were comrades of a more uniform type. One immediately had the impression that these were the rem-

the Order of the Red Star), Mona (also from Kiev), and Lucy (from Simferopol). The names of the other five Zionists escape me.

As soon as the boat cast off from the dock, the GPU plenipotentiary announced that we were to see him in his cabin one at a time. Krasavin went first. Upon returning, he said that we were going to Berezovo and he suggested that we decline to sign the paper being offered by the plenipotentiary—he had already set an example by not signing. I was the next to go. The plenipotentiary eyed me nervously (after Krasavin’s refusal he was expecting the same from the rest of us), and shoved a piece of paper at me where I read that “for the subsequent term of my exile I (name-blank) am being transferred to the town of Berezovo and am making a signed statement to the effect that on the steamboat I will not engage in any kind of conversations with anyone.” Upon reading this, I stared at the plenipotentiary, shook my head, and left. The others didn’t sign either. We were not accompanied by a guard; rather we were followed around by the steamboat’s snitches. Signing the paper would have almost certainly exposed us to arrest. I neglected to mention that signing the paper would have obligated us not to leave the boat when it docked at the stops along the way. As a form of demonstration, we made a point of disembarking at the first stop, even though there was nothing to do there.

In Samarovo,¹ where we transferred to another steam-boat for the Tobolsk-Obdorsk run, we had to wait for a day. Disembarking, we, accompanied by the plenipotentiary, walked to the Samarovo division of the GPU, where they arranged overnight billets for us with the local political exiles. I stayed with Lev Vainberg,² a mem-

¹ The anarchist Aron Baron (1891–1937) had been exiled to Samarovo in tsarist times. See <https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/47d903>.

² Lev Bentsionovich Vainberg (1895–1937) was active in the underground anarchist movement in Odessa in the 1920s. Arrested in 1929, he served terms of exile in the Northern Urals and Voronezh. In 1934 he was arrested again for belonging to an anarchist group organized by Aron Baron. In 1936 he was trans-

ber of the Odessa youth group, who had joined the anarchist movement during the NEP period.

With our arrival in Berezovo, we increased the size of the “cadre” of two comrades already serving their exile terms there. One of them was Pavlik, whose last name I can’t remember for sure, even though I worked him every day for more than a year (I think it was Romanov). Pavlik had arrived in Berezovo from the Suzdal political isolator. If I’m not mistaken, he was involved in the publishing house “Golos Truda.” Comrades from Detroit should know him: he was fairly short, solidly-built with blonde hair, a wide face, always good-natured, sociable, and witty. He worked at Ford as a labourer. I don’t recall in which year he returned to Russia. The other guy was Kostya the sailor from Vladivostok. In WWI he served on a submarine of the Far Eastern Fleet. He was gloomy and sullen, and yet an amazingly good comrade. I ran into him again briefly in 1933 in Novosibirsk, when I got out of prison; he was serving his “minus” there after Berezovo.

A month or two after our arrival we were joined by the anarchist Lida Mayevskaya, a student from near Vologda. Three months later she became Neikrug’s wife. She was one of the young anarchists who were being arrested in 1928–1929, not because they had engaged in any practical work necessarily, but just because they shared the ideals of anarchism. Neikrug withdrew into family life and ceased to frequent our evening get-togethers, although the latter were not as frequent as in Surgut, because everyone came home from work exhausted. All of us, except Neikrug, who had succeeded in getting a job as a bookkeeper in a local cooperative, were engaged in earth-moving work. Ribtrest³ was building an underground cold storage facility. In Berezovo we could already

ferred to camps in the Far East and it was there, in Amurskaya Oblast, that he was shot on November 26 1937.

³ “Ribtrest” is short for “Trest rybnoy promyshlennosti” (Trust of the fishing industry). Soviet trusts were industrial groupings of similar state enterprises working on a commercial basis with the aim of acquiring profits.

rather than die slowly, we would declare a hunger strike that would produce the same result with less suffering. The chief of the SPO informed us that hunger strikes were no longer in fashion and that if we wanted to die, that was our business. He said that the population in “freedom” was subsisting on rations not much greater than ours.

After making our position known in writing to the head of the GPU for the West Siberian region and the procurator responsible for monitoring the organs of the GPU (did our letters reach their destinations?), we—10 anarchists and 24 Dashnaks—declared a hunger strike. During the hunger strike, Lobe had a heart attack and became partly deaf; M. Belyaev coughed a lot as his tuberculosis was aggravated. Two of the Dashnaks did not recover after the hunger strike and remained sick and bedridden. After ten days of the hunger strike, a GPU official came and told us that “directions” had been received from Moscow concerning our “case” and we would be issued the ration of the internal prison. He had brought with him three days worth of the ration (bread and sugar).

Although we fasted only nine and a half days, it felt like longer, since before the longer strike we had not been receiving sufficient nourishment. It’s a curious fact that the suffering from a hunger strike was experienced only in the first days (up to the fifth day), and subsequently there was a feeling of indifference and a state was reached where dying seemed easy, pain-less, and even necessary. The worst torture during the first five days was the daydreams about food that banished sleep. After six days you are either asleep or in a semi-conscious state. After the hunger strike they brought a Georgian (a Menshevik) from the prison hospital into our cell. Upon learning that the political cell had declared a hunger strike, he had also fasted nine days in solidarity with us.

Within a short period of time, we, the anarchists, were summoned one by one and on different days for a “final” interrogation. Now it was less a case of trying to get us to sign a piece of paper and more a case of probing how firmly we were attached to our

had happened, that he had been “finished off.” I asked for the prison supervisor and explained my predicament.

“So why did you give them away? Don’t worry, he’s been sent further and the convoy guards will bring back your clothes.”

No matter how the butchers try to hid their bloody deeds, the prison knows them: he was part of a batch of prisoners who were shot. It was even known that the “professional” executioners were under the influence of cocaine or booze. They shot through the clothing, and so my coat and *valenki* were “shot.”

Having been taken to interrogation once, they didn’t bother me any more, even though I expected another session every night.

At the end of March, all of us exiles from Tomsk, except for Bem, were transferred to the city prison. In the commandant’s office, I began to demand a coat and *valenki*. For asserting that a young man had been shot in my clothes, I was threatened with reprisals, supposedly for “false” accusations directed at the organs of the GPU. Nevertheless, they gave me a wretched sheepskin jacket and I got a pair of boots from Lobe. Bem had been released from the internal prison earlier.

In the prison we were amazed by the sight of stooped, skeletal, barely mobile figures, on whose bodies hung tattered rags. These were arrestees who had no one to send them parcels—and who did in that year?—and were subsisting on the prison ration: 200 grams of bread per day plus gruel. We saw that we could expect to end up like this, dying either from hunger or exhaustion. We encouraged ourselves with the hope that we would soon be transported to the destinations designated for us by the GPU and escape from the “embrace” of death from starvation.

We waited a week, then a month ... Our cases were not being expedited. In the same situation were 24 Armenian Dashnaks, collected from various places of exile in Western Siberia. We confronted the chief of the SPO [Secret Political Department] of the GPU, demanding that our cases be expedited and that we be issued the same rations that we had at the GPU internal prison. Otherwise,

get a sense of the “new times.” Throughout the summer barges arrived, one after another, with “special settlers” for the north—Muzhi, Obdorsk, and the Kara Sea. Many of them also settled in Berezovo. Some were quartered with residents, others in hastily knocked-together barracks. They were registered with Ribtrest, where they worked. Former peasants from Ukraine and the southern Urals were made fishermen. Outside the town there was a special village for new “settlers” employed in the woodworking industry. Some of them were registered for forestry work—preparing construction lumber. These people lived in much worse conditions than the Ribtrest workers.

“Special settlers” were conveyed to the north all summer long—in the holds of steamers or in barges that were towed. There was no provision made for illness or mortality en route; people with families were moved literally like livestock intended for slaughter. A party of Kuban peasants were sent from Obdorsk for “wintering” to Khe, or perhaps farther north, where they found themselves in such straits due to poor planning that of the 500 sent, only 240 returned in the spring. An “unfortunate loss of manpower” as the official representatives of the “Stalinist oprichina” put it in those days when referring to mortality in the camps.

At the end of 1930, Caucasians began to arrive in Berezovo: 27 Georgian social-democrats and 19 Armenians (Dashnaks).⁴ Sixty per cent of them were peasants. Filipp Prianishnikov finished his term of exile in early 1931 and had to wait for the navigation season to leave for his “minus.” We saw him off on the first steamer. He chose the village of Privolzhye, in the territory of the Volga Germans. I got one letter from him in which he said that he was working as a bookkeeper in a MTS (Machine-Tractor Station). At the end of navigation in 1931 I also left for the “minus” 24 I had been awarded. I was required to spend three years any-where except: 1)

⁴ Dashnaks were members of an Armenian nationalist and socialist party founded in 1890.

the border regions of Soviet Ukraine, 2) Moscow and Leningrad and their oblasts, 3) the Trans-Caucasian republics, 4) any capitals of autonomous republics. I chose the city of Tomsk, where there were already some of our comrades whom I knew.

The reverse journey from Berezhovo to my “voluntarily” chosen place of exile—Tomsk, will seem odd and incomprehensible to a non-Soviet person, for one’s fellow travelers never guessed that you were being escorted under the “all-seeing eye” of the GPU. I will dwell in more detail on this method of escorting as it relates to everyone traveling to a “minus,” i.e. to a place of exile.

On every passenger steamer plying the Ob River, a region of exile, there were regular agents of the GPU-NKVD on assignment from the plenipotentiaries of this organ. When we stopped at Tobolsk on the way upriver, I got off the steamer to buy something to eat and noticed two “specimens” not letting me out of their sight. In Tyumen this pair handed me off at the station to another agent. For as soon as I left the platform, this person pushed his way out of the crowd and became my “shadow.”

In Tomsk I had arranged to stay with a fellow-countryman, arrested at the same time as me, who had served his term of exile and remained in Tomsk for his “minus” (I had been corresponding with him). I had to register my address at the operations section of the Tomsk GPU, where I was told that I had to appear at that office every 10 days, that I did not have the right to leave the city, that a change of address had to be registered within 24 hours, or else—“as you yourself know, you’ll end up in a concentration camp.”

After a week of snow-shovelling, I got a job as an accounting clerk in one of the educational institutions. Within a short period time, I had met the other comrades serving a “minus” in Tomsk:

1. Mikhail Akselrod from Aleksandrovsk in southern Ukraine, who had been a student at the Kharkov VUZ [University]. In Tomsk he was working in the cartolithographic section of

of him. His thirst was so great, that to get the water he agreed to sign whatever the GPU needed. A third cellmate was “bought,” i.e. with a promise to release they recruited him as a collaborator. It’s true, on the second day he disappeared, but to where? A fourth had his fingers crushed between a door jamb and the door. In general, the GPU functionaries like to use an “individual approach” to their work.

During the three months I spent in the internal prison, I was brought to interrogation only once. I was presented with a charge of belonging to an underground, counter-revolutionary organization and of conducting propaganda. Upon being told to sign, I counted the number of lines on the charge sheet and wrote: “I have read x number of lines of the accusation presented to me, but I do admit any guilt” (signature). Referring to the number of lines was to prevent them from adding anything afterwards. The interrogator mentioned the “leaflet” found in Lobe’s apartment, but I immediately interrupted and said: “This is your work.” The interrogator threatened me with the concentration camp for “insolence,” and ordered the guard to take me back to the cell.

The guy who, upon my arrival in the cell, offered me a place to sleep in the bunks, was a 19-year-old lad accused of espionage. He was arrested in the summer when he had been lightly dressed. By the time winter rolled around, he had left in one piece only an under-shirt and slacks. Like the rest of us, everyday he had to pick out from these garments the “guests” found in Soviet prisons. Neither bedding nor underwear were provided in investigatory prisons, no matter how long the stay. When he was summoned to interrogation, this lad borrowed warm outerwear and footwear from cellmates, since it was necessary to cross a courtyard to get to the interrogation unit. After getting to know me, he borrowed my coat and valenki [felt boots] on three occasions to go for interrogations lasting from 12 to 18 hours.

But on the fourth occasion, he didn’t return within 24 hours. I waited another day, then another, and realized that something bad

capacity was “6–8 persons.” Now I was in a cell with 62 “human bodies.” While I was still standing at the door I was peppered with questions: Who are you? Where did you come from? Why are you here? I answered: “I’m an anarchist, and I was arrested while in exile as a result of a GPU provocation.” On the bunks near the window someone raised their head and offered me a place, explaining that he would sit at my feet, while I was lying down, and later we would change places. It was already close to morning. Upon waking up, I saw a bunch of people thrusting their heads towards the window, in which there was an open vent. They were lining up to breathe the frosty air, flowing into the room with wreathes of mist. At night it was forbidden to open the vent. This sight re-minded me of fish gathering under the ice of the Ob River at a places where streams enter it, seeking oxygen when they have nothing to breathe.

As a rule, people in the cell were taken to interrogation only at night: from 8 p.m. until morning. There were cases where they returned only after 12, 24, or even 48 hours. During this time, the prisoner was interrogated by a relay of interrogators. During pauses in this procedure, the prisoner was required to stand at attention; if they fell asleep while standing, the ever-present guard would give them a “gentle prod with a bayonet” or a “soft touch with a rifle butt” to wake them up. If they collapsed unconscious they were revived by letting in cold air. When the interrogations, forced standing, and hunger and reduced the prisoners to a state of complete apathy and reduced mental capacity, they were given fabricated statements and slanders to sign.

One of my fellow-prisoners, after a 36-hour interrogation with forced standing, no sleep, and no food, regained consciousness only when he was back in the cell. With hysterical sobbing, he tore his hair and lamented: “What have I done? I’ve destroyed innocent people! ...” But it was too late: the Stalinist inquisition had already moved on. Another of my cellmates held out for 48 hours. After interrogation he was put in solitary confinement, fed salted food, and at the next interrogation a glass of water was placed in front

the Geological Exploration Committee as a translator—many “foreign specialists,” i.e. Germans, worked there.

2. Artur Lobe, from Petersburg, worked as a bookkeeper in an industrial artel; living with Lobe in his apartment was the artist Berezovsky, calling himself a sympathizer to our movement. He was serving a term of exile in Tomsk not for “the usual,” but under some other kind of article.
3. Step Razin from Ufa, who had arrived from Narym and was working as a manager at one of the educational institutions.
4. Mikhail Belyaev (brother of the anarchist Ivan Belyaev), who was employed as a metalworker in a craftsmen’s artel. He had been with Lobe both in exile and in an isolator.

From Akselrod I learned that Professor Bem (mathematician from Moscow) was serving a term of exile in Tomsk.⁵ I didn’t have a chance to visit him in his apartment, but I did meet him soon in a cell of the internal prison of the GPU in Tomsk.

All of us had very little free time, since those of us exiles with jobs generally had to stay at work evenings, almost doing the work of two. Therefore when we got together, it was not more than three or four comrades at a time. Belyaev was sick with tuberculosis, and was always depressed. Lobe was a nervous wreck. His nervousness was aggravated by an ear ailment which required an operation with trepanation of the skull. He acquired this condition—or if it was previously existing, aggravated it—as a result of blows received during a beating in the Verkhne-Uralsk politisolator. Akselrod also had

⁵ The mystical anarchist Dmitry Aleksandrovich Bem(1880–1938) was a mathematician who taught at several universities in Moscow. An anarchist from 1914, he was one of the directors of the Kropotkin Museum in the 1920s. Arrested in 1930, he was sentenced in 1931 to five years of exile. In 1937 he was arrested again, charged with terrorism, and shot in 1938. When access to his case file became possible in the 1990s, it was discovered that in 1931 he had agreed to act as an informant for the GPU in order to avoid a prison term.

symptoms of tuberculosis, but did not seem to be ill. Andriychenko was inventing spanner wrenches, arithmometers, and studied television. A person can make themselves at home even in a cell for solitary confinement, and we had a “cell” in the middle of Tomsk. It’s clear that we were growing roots and reconciling ourselves to the terms of exile given us by the GPU. But we forgot that our “master” had other designs.

On January 1 1933, in the middle of work, I was visited at the office by a “self-confident citizen” who presented me with a “warrant for search and arrest.” He carried out a careful search of all my files and the drawers of my desk and said: “Follow me, your apartment has been sealed, we were already there last night.” (I didn’t sleep at home the previous night.) In the cell where I was locked up, there were already Lobe and two others, whom he introduced as: “Our comrades—Bem and Naumenko.” The latter, Kostya by name if I remember correctly, was a Petersburg worker, an electrician, who had recently arrived in Tomsk to serve a term of exile. Akselrod, Belyaev, Pazin, Andriychenko, Berezovsky, and the operatic artist Nikolayev were locked up in another cell.

“What’s going on?” I asked Artur (Lobe). “Another provocation,” he replied with habitual nervousness, aggravated by the circumstances. Bem paced about the cell in a high state of agitation, evidently caught unawares by this “surprise.” Naumenko, Lobe, and I understood the situation as “business as usual.”

In the evening we succeeded in exchanging a few words with the other comrades and decided to ask for “our” GPU plenipotentiary—Khnyazev, chief of the SPO (secret-political section). By banging on the door and rattling dishes, we got the guard to summon the plenipotentiary, who listened to our protest against our arrest and announced: “All of you have been arrested by order of the Novosibirsk GPU. I don’t know anything about it, only that I’m sending you away as soon as there are places in a railway wagon.”

We had to wait five days. All of us wanted to get to Novosibirsk as soon as possible because we were unhappy with the bad food

and our crowded cell: there were five of us in a cell intended for two. They sent us by “special convoy,” i.e. in a first class carriage in which there were two compartments—one for us and one for Red Army soldiers of the GPU-NKVD. It was only during the trip that I learned the cause of our arrest: in a closet in Lobe’s apartment, which he shared with the landlord, they found a “proclamation,” printed by shapirograph, denouncing the “industrialization of the country” at the cost millions of deaths by starvation.

Once in the reception area of the Novosibirsk GPU, we were called up one by one and taken to cells. Here I parted with the comrades and didn’t see them again, with the exception of Bem, until April, when they moved us from the GPU’s internal prison to the city prison.

When they brought me to the cell and opened the door, I was greeted with a miasma that was a mixture of human body odour and chamber pot fumes. Upon crossing the threshold, I couldn’t move a step farther without stepping on someone. The door slammed behind me. I turned and began to kick the door, expressing my indignation at such inhuman conditions. The screw, approaching the door, said in a quiet tone: “Stop the banging, it’s useless,” and went away.

In the screw’s tone of voice I sensed the “school of revolution of cadres of the GPU” and the uselessness of protest. It was already late and most of the prisoners were asleep. Awakened by the racket I made, many of them raised their heads with expressions of amazement and incomprehension on their faces: why does this guy still think he can protest?

The cell was packed like a tin of sardines: on the bunks people were laying on their sides to save space, while in the passage between the bunks people were laying “Chinese-style”—one person’s feet next to the adjacent person’s head, like sardines. Under the bunks you could lay any which way. Back in 1919 I spent several months in a cell of similar size in the Kharkov Holodnogorsky Prison which still had a sign over the door indicating that it’s ca-